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Vol. L.



OR,

Uncle Bedrock's Queer Game at Ginger Flat.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "PISTOL PARDS," "HANDS UP,"
"PINNACLE PETE," "HURRAH HARRY,"
"THE DUDE FROM DENVER," "DER-
RINGER DECK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A CAMPAIGN IN PROSPECT.

WALNUT BAR had had its day, and few persons got off the stage at that point for more than a temporary stay. At the same time it had been a place of some importance before the placers petered out; and when that disaster occurred there was a resident population with interests so fairly fixed that it did not dwindle away into nothingness after the fashion of so many towns, under like circumstances, but with less permanent improvement and general activity.

Moreover, it was a halting place for sports who were going on to the greener pastures beyond,

IT WAS A LITTLE REMARKABLE, THE TIME THE TWO HARD CASES MADE, THE MOMENT
THEY HAD OLD BEDROCK'S ORDER TO "GIT!"

that lay around Glory Gulch on the one hand, and Ginger Flat on the other. When there had to be change of stage at any rate it was natural that they should stop a while and try their hands with the local talent—and quite frequently there was no need of going further. The men of the Bar played a strong game; and those who came to shear remained, or took the back track, most decidedly shorn. If they had succeeded in getting to the Gulch, or even to Ginger Flat, it is not likely their luck would have been any better, as the three camps held each other pretty level in the facility with which the stranger could be taken in and devoured.

One pleasant day in August a young man approached Walnut Bar from the direction of Glory Gulch. He was on foot, and strolled along the road after the fashion of one who had been having some extended pedestrian exercise, though not especially tired. He was in no great haste, but, on the contrary, seemed engaged with his own thoughts.

As he came in sight of the town he halted.

"The question for the court and jury is, whether to try the Bar as a resting-place, until I can get an increase to my capital from some direction or other, or run the risks, and go on to the Flat and begin the campaign pretty well down to bed-rock. Those robbers at the Gulch bit a little closer than I thought, at the time, and the fellows down here are not much better. I have hit a bad streak, and there is no use to deny it. Perhaps it would be better to stay at the Bar till it runs out, for I don't want any of it beyond. Millions in the bank won't do me a bit of good unless I can hit the turn. Suppose we consider."

After some such fashion ran his thoughts, and looking carelessly around he noted that a little to the right there was a cozy nook which looked very inviting after a prolonged struggle with the alkali-laden air of the hot and dusty road. Before he had fairly made up his mind as to what he was going to do he found himself resting under the branches, alongside of a convenient boulder.

For five minutes, perhaps, he reclined there, without making any motion toward leaving. Then, the galloping of a horse caused him to look up quickly toward the road.

He was just in time to see the horseman draw up, not more than a rod or two away, and address a man whom he had met.

"On time, but I had a hard run to make it. What's the news?"

"Lots of it, and a heap sight interesting to a gentleman of about your size and complexion. In the first place, you want to keep your eyes wide open, for they are after you with a hotter stick than usual. They have sent a man down in this region to look up your record, and he's a holy terror. I couldn't find out in what sort of shape he was going to tackle you, or which end of the string he was going to begin at, but he's on the ground somewhere. They say he has eyes like a gimlet, and is mighty hard to fool. And they couldn't have sent him at a worse time."

"Don't worry about him. I have had interviews with a number of these gentry with the big reputations, and I am here yet. His friends may be asking where he is before long. If they are I can swear that I don't know."

"Ha, ha! You never took the trouble to look what lies at the other end of the flume. Well, I don't want to know, either. There is enough to find out without digging around to discover that. Nextly, the party you are looking for is around. They have made some inquiries about the Swallow Tail, and mean business from the word go."

"Ah," said the horseman, with a pleasure that could not be mistaken. "Then it was a true bill, after all. I began to be afraid that it was a false alarm. Both of them, are on hand, you say?"

"All, both; the old lady and her daughter. I should say they were as sharp as two steel-traps, though the younger one hasn't much to say, and the other one puts on the most of the airs."

"More luck than I had hoped for, and you can figure up an extra hundred for the information. It is just as well that no one else knows the procession is about to arrive, or there might be a delegation of prominent citizens appointed to meet them. Anything else? My time is short; and you can guess the rest."

"That young man you were asking after had a hard row to hoe at the Gulch. They cleaned him out slick as a loon on a millpond, and never gave him a chance to talk back after the fashion he sometimes delights in. As far as current reports indicate, by the time he gets to the Flat he will be on his uppers; and if the walking ain't good it's doubtful if he gets there at all, this year."

"And next year he may come and welcome. Good again! Things are working about right, though I would just as soon have heard that some one had run a lead shaft through the center of his anatomy. No such good luck, though! It's a hopeful sign that the thing hasn't worked the other way. Anything more?"

"Nothing else on board the hearse that is worth looking at; and unless it comes in at the last moment, nothing that would kick at a Californian flea. Go in and prosper!"

"Prosper it is. So long! See Jack and it will be all straight."

Off went the horseman in the direction whence he had come, while the man who had met him turned and walked back in the direction of the town, both supremely unconscious that there had been a listener to their conversation.

It was chance that had made the young man a listener; and he had not, at first, cared to understand what was being said. It was plain that these two had met there by appointment, and that they were talking secrets. Possibly the fact of both being late on the ground had caused them to be careless, and to overlook the duty of making an examination of the neighborhood. But then, they spoke in such a low tone, it was ten to one they would not be overheard from any spot not directly under their observation.

But the ears that were near were remarkably sharp, and at the mention of the Swallow Tail they began to give the closest attention. When their owner was once more alone his face had lost its listlessness, and he raised himself up, and advanced cautiously to the trail.

By that time there was no one in sight, for the horseman had gone back over the divide, while the other man had been lost behind the bend in the road, though Walnut Bar could be seen in the distance, in the valley below.

"I suspect the streak is broken or I would not have run into such a bit of luck. So there is some one else after the Swallow Tail! Odd it is that it should have lain there all these years, as no doubt it has done, without any one troubling himself about it until I started on the war-path. Now, there is a move afoot that means business."

"But, who are the women? The old man's family, of course, turned up to try their hand once more. All right. I'll keep my promise, and do the square thing by them if I find they deserve it, trusting to luck to come out on the right side of the fence."

"But, there will be no time to fool away at the Bar. The sooner I get on the ground the better, and if it is on time, the stage will give me a pretty even race to catch it before it leaves. I would like to find out who the fellow was who brought out the news from town, but that will keep; and I will know soon enough whom I have to buck against if there is any kind of a fight in the near future. Here goes."

He gathered himself together, and hastily began the descent of the hill.

CHAPTER II.

THE "DEACON" AND HIS PARD VIEW THEIR STOCK IN TRADE.

"AND you are sure there is money in it?"

Two men were toiling up the mountain-side, to the rear of Ginger Flat. Neither of them looked like a miner, one having the appearance of a professional sport, while the other, who had just spoken, was soberly dressed, and in any town or city might have been taken for a prosperous business man.

A person making a guess on the strength of his looks would not have gone far wrong, either—surprised though he might be at the companionship in which the "deacon" was just now to be found; for Hark Havens was all that the surface implied—and, something more. He was sport and business man combined, with equal luck in either direction. It had been hinted on several occasions that he had a covert way of assisting luck that would not be considered fair were its methods known. As there was a funeral after such expressions, people were growing cautious how they gave an opinion in public; and Hark had so many friends and allies that it was not altogether safe to say much in private.

"Money in it? To be sure there is," answered Havens, as the two faced about and looked back into the valley below.

"Do I ever take up a job that has no money in it? There is a cold hundred thousand and no mistake, unless the man was crazy as a billed owl. If the paper came straight from the old fellow, and was really to be left unopened for five years, he was not playing the biggest kind of a joke on his heirs and assigns. Here is just as good a place as any to let me see the original document. You say you know it by heart, but, that's not as good as the real, simon-pure thing. Fish it out and let us hear what it sounds like by daylight."

The "deacon" heaved a sigh as he thrust his hand into his breast and extracted from a pocket there the document concerning which the sport was speaking. It was written on a large sheet of paper, in a bold though rather peculiar hand, and was in the shape of a letter, running after this fashion:

"CAMP IN THE HILLS.

"MY DEAR WIFE:—

"When this reaches you it may be a surprise, unless you have obtained a hint of its substance from another possible direction. I shall be as brief as possible, and if I am not as clear as you might wish it may turn out all the better in the end.

"By this time you have either doubled and tripled the fortune you received from me at the time of my death or you have bartered it all away for what the world calls experience. In the former case I can only furnish a pleasant addition to your fortune; in the latter I can give you enough to either live in comfort, or to pick your flint and try it again.

"You have already received all that I accumulated

in my first lucky adventure; but I made no mention in the papers you then received of a secret mine that I worked until the lead, never a very promising one, dropped. I took out some ore, which I packed by mule to Oroton; but the great strike that I made there was a pocket, accidentally found in the horsing, from which I took nuggets, large and small, to amount, at a rough guess, to a hundred thousand dollars. This treasure is hidden in the mine. Measure seventeen feet from the mouth of the shaft, and then dig three feet.

"I run the risk of having it found by a stranger rather than place it in your hands along with the other fortune because I know, if you are to lose in the ventures I feel assured you will make, the whole would go as quick as the half; and if you were aware of its existence you would never know rest or peace until you had reduced this wealth to possession. I have left this paper with a man whom I believe to be honest as times go, and he will forward it to your address at the expiration of five years. At the same time you will probably receive a communication from another party which will reveal to you more exactly the location of the mine. In case you should not, however, go to the firm through whom the former matters were settled and see if you can find out from them the whereabouts of a young man by the name of Lester Lawrence, and also ask for the papers in regard to his interests in the Swallow Tail, which they are holding for him. By showing this letter they will give them to you, or, at least, allow you a sight of them. Read every other line, beginning with the second; and on that description meet any one acquainted with this country can guide you to the neighborhood. After that you must run your chances.

"With much love,
"YOUR AFFECTIONATE HUSBAND."

"The infernal idiot!" was Hark Havens's exclamation as he closed the perusal of this document.

"What a power of trouble it would have saved if he had bunched all the papers together, and put them in the hands of that same honest man of his! I suppose that fellow, if he is still alive, knows where this secret mine is, but, how are we to get at him? Where is he? Did you ever hear of Lester Lawrence?"

"Yes, I have heard of him," answered the deacon. "He did some prospecting through this country a number of years ago, though I never heard that he had any great amount of luck in it. He could do a heap more with pistol and deck. If he is still living it is just as likely as not he will turn up, now that the five years are about up; but if he knows where the mine is he may want to keep the knowledge for himself. And I should judge that he would be a mighty bad man to try to pinch, if he has kept on improving up to the present time."

"And the queerest thing is that this seems to have been written after the writer was dead—if what you told me about the man is law and gospel. How do you account for that?"

"Not at all. I suppose that the old fellow wasn't dead when it was reported that he had handed in his checks. That would be all of a piece with the rest of his performances."

"But if that is so, what is the matter with his being alive to this day? It's just as well to consider beforehand what sort of snags we may run against in this stock operation."

"What of that?" answered the deacon, with more sharpness in his voice than was usual. "If you think there is any risk about it throw up the game. I never cared to go into it much, though of course I could get another pard. There are plenty of men who would be willing to run lots of risk, and work a year on a grub-stake, if they thought there was a reasonable chance to find a pocket lined with nuggets to the tune of a hundred thousand dollars."

"Oh, don't get wrathful because I ask a few questions. I haven't weakened on the job of finding the spot, though I would a heap sight sooner got the points first, before we had done all the tramping and digging that it looks as though we are in for. You are sure that we are on the right trail now?"

"Without doubt. I got my information from a man who worked in these regions about that time. He knew old Swallow Tail like a book, and put me up to a thing or two. We are not far off from the neighborhood just now, though we would seem to be on the wrong side of the valley. A tenderfoot strikes in now and then, but he never stays here. Before two weeks are over he sees where his mistake has been, and moves accordingly."

"If you know where the spot is, lead on. There is no time to waste in fooling. The woman may get that hint from another direction, and turn up at any moment. And we had better have the fun done and over before she gets here."

"Very well. Follow me. I can take you to an abandoned shaft, though whether it is the right one or not is a different thing."

CHAPTER III.

EASY TO SUIT.

"HEV it ter suit yerself; I'm willin', any way yer fixes it. When I think ov ther weary, dreary days ez might be afore me; ov all ther sleepless nights; ov ther trampin', an' ther sufferin' thet I might hev ter endoar afore tter nat'ral time comes ter shuffle off this byer mortal coil, it strikes me thet I never met a better benefacter. Ef ye are all riddy, Gallagher, let her go."

The speaker was an individual of the genus

tramp, if looks went for anything. He spoke with a distinct whine to his voice, but there were no traces of fear or excitement there, though the circumstances were such that he might have been pardoned for showing one or the other.

He was reclining wearily by the roadside. At his elbow lay a stout cudgel, thrust between the knotted ends of the dirty, red handkerchief which enveloped his personal property. His clothes were in tatters; in the toes of his boots there were yawning holes, while the heels were so twisted over that it looked as though it must be an agony to walk on them. His hair was long and frowzy, and hung down, around a fat, red face that was, in addition, almost covered by a stubby beard of several weeks' growth. His frame was ponderous, and his sunburned neck was a sample as to fatness. This was the sort of man who looked up into the muzzle of a revolver held by the masked outlaw who was most frequently spoken of as "General Gloom."

The masked man spoke impatiently.

"Come, come, old man, that won't go down. There is not a doubt but that you are here for a particular purpose; and something tells me that it has a reference to us. If there is any mistake in that, we are willing to have it rectified. If not—up the flume, and no time for prayers! Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"Ef I war ter talk frum now tell there warn't no more time ter talk in I couldn't say more ner I hev. I'm jest ole Uncle Bedrock, a wanderin' an' a-weepin' my way through this vale ov tears. I'm hyer 'cause me legs brung me. Ef I hed bin ther proud persessor ov ther coin required, I'd hev bin whar ther stage are. Ez no—I'm trampin', ez yer sees, goin' down ter Ginger Flat, ter see ef I kin hear anything ov me poor boy, ez I lost some twenty-eight year ago. I don't know you an' I don't want ter know you, unless you kin loan me a quarter; but I never keer ter sp'ile fun. Ef yer mouth are set fur cold meat fur breakfast, an' there's no other victim handy, jest pull on that bit ov iron an' I'll drop, peaceful ez a clam at low water. Life hez bin a disserp'tment all 'round, an' I've 'bout concluded ter hev done with it. Don't that suit yer royal nibs? Ef not, say some more."

"I believe you are a lie clean through, but there is no time to talk the subject over. As there may be the shadow of a doubt, you shall have the benefit of it—for the present—if just for the sake of your coolness. Johnson, hustle him away! He has a pair of eyes, and there seems to be nothing the matter with his lungs. Unless there is a unanimous vote for death he must be got out of this at once. If he tries to run—no foolishness! Kill him at once."

"Yes, Mr. Johnson, kill him on ther spot. When ole Uncle Bedrock gits so fur off'n his mental equiperpoise ez ter try ter run he orter die, ef thar's no lunertick 'sylum handy. But, reckon it's too late ter remove him now. Ther stage fur Ginger Flat are a-comin' round ther bend, an' yer got all both hands full ter 'tend ter that. Jest go on with ther bizness, an' I kin wait fur supper tell ther fun's over. I'm in no hurry, an' begins ter hev a feeble eenterest ter see ef yer onderstands yer perfeshun. When I war in ther trade—but thar's no time fur that. You hear it jingle?"

The tramp waved his hand lazily toward the bend, and made no other motion, though at the address of the chief a man, supposed to be Johnson, had stepped briskly forward, and would doubtless have said his say after the roughest of manners had not a gesture from the leader deterred him.

It was not certain whether Gloom was listening to Uncle Bedrock, or to the sound to which the latter called his attention. The distant rattle was growing quite audible, and it was only a question of a few minutes when the stage would make its appearance.

"Off with him into the bushes! The rest of you take your positions, and don't forget instructions. Here, you; move!"

The tramp was as slippery as an eel, and a great deal quicker in his motions than Johnson dreamed.

"Yer rumble, bumble, over-come-tumble servant! that won't sp'ile bizness. Gentile ez a lamb, an' twicet ez easy ter han'le. Come on, Johnson; we'll lay low."

And Uncle Bedrock dropped his face between his legs, rolled over and over, and plunged out of sight into the bushes, followed by his especial guard, who made several grabs in vain, and dared not stop him with a bullet lest the sound might give a warning to the driver of the approaching stage.

Of course the tramp knew that silence was in demand, and that so long as he kept quiet it was not likely that any one else would make a noise. When he had rolled heels over head far enough into the shrubbery which lined the road at that place, to be hidden from the trail, he suddenly came to a halt, sitting bolt upright at the foot of a tree, and staring up at Johnson, with one uplifted finger motioning for silence.

"Stiddy, now! Ef you botched this job ther gen'ral'd never fergive yer. Say nothin', but lay low. Ther sport are about ter begin."

And it seemed as though Uncle Bedrock was

right, for at that moment the stage came swinging around the turn.

Johnson was in no good humor now. He threw his hand back to the butt of his revolver as he caught sight of the man once more, and it looked as though he was going to make quick work; but the movement had no terrors for the tramp.

"Don't yer be a blazin' fool, Johnson. Can't yer see I hev yer kivered? Drap it, man, er I'll drap you."

Johnson paused, looked; the "drop" was on him, sure enough! Held low down by Uncle Bedrock's other hand was a self-acting revolver, which lay in perfect line with his breast. The hammer seemed to be gently rising, and the only question worth considering was, whether the finger that was on the trigger was not going to press a trifle too hard. Bedrock understood the doubt, and continued in his average drawl:

"It's all fair an' squar' ez long ez you keep ter orders. I don't want ter slay a poor boy in ther bloom ov his youth; an' I don't want ter sp'ile ther fun ez are on ther carpet; but ef yer crooks yer elbow an inch furdur, down yer goes."

In his white wrath it is doubtful what answer Johnson might have made had not his attention been recalled to the business of his principal by the crack of a revolver, near at hand, and a snort and scream, mixed up with, rather than followed by, a confused jumble of sounds, made by struggling horses, dragging wheels, and the well known cry of "Hands up!"

To make the stoppage of the coach a certainty, General Gloom had shot one of the wheel-horses; and while the rest of the team was plunging in a vain effort to drag the coach forward against the weight of the fallen animal, and the power of the break which the driver had kicked over without delay, he uttered his challenge.

CHAPTER IV.

OLD FRIENDS MEET.

JUST before the stage left Walnut Bar for Ginger Flat a young man, or, at least, a man who could not be called old, since he was not more than thirty-two or thirty-three, made his appearance at the station in great haste, and secured an inside place, very much to the disgust of Mrs. DeLangdon, who had hoped that she would have the whole of the interior of the vehicle to herself and daughter.

He appeared on foot and alone, and seemed to have had a rapid pedestrian journey for some distance. He was breathing fast, and his clothing had gathered rather more of the alkali dust than one dressed as neatly as he was would be apt to care to carry. He flicked off some of the dust with a coarse, red handkerchief, which he drew from an inner pocket, and looked back over his shoulder as though he would like to have a minute or two to himself to refit; but the driver was already handling the ribbons, the starting hour was at hand; and so, with that momentary hesitation to show that the presence of the ladies had been noticed, he swung himself lightly in through the door, and sunk into his seat, without a second glance at his vis-a-vis, who happened to be the younger lady of the two.

Mrs. DeLangdon turned toward him as he entered, and took a deliberate survey of his features. As they were neither villainous nor bad-looking, she seemed to glean some satisfaction from the view. She settled herself back in her seat, with a better satisfied air; and gave evidence that she was going to try and take the journey as easily as possible. Before very long her eyes closed, and she fell into something very like a doze.

For this she might be pardoned, since she had slept but little the night before, and the three passengers who had got off at the Bar, without having meant to be at all disagreeable, had kept up a loud-voiced conversation, which had set every nerve of the lady on edge, and rendered comfort out of the question.

The road just after leaving the Flat was good, and the teams were in fine humor for going, so that the motion and the silence together were quite a sedative. Once she started up and gave a glance at her daughter; but as that young lady was looking wearily out of the window, the words that were no doubt on her tongue remained unuttered.

Compared with her mother, Miss DeLangdon would be called a young lady; but she was no longer a girl, and it was known among her acquaintances in the East that she had passed her twenty-fifth mile-stone by some years.

She was none the less handsome for that, and would have had no objection to the fact being known; though her mother was shy of the subject, being somewhat of a beauty herself, and not at all anxious to call attention to the subject of days and dates.

At first the young man looked discreetly out of the window. By and by, in some occult way, he discovered that the lady opposite to him was doing the same thing. Then, he would have been less, or more, than human if he had not taken the opportunity to glance in her direction, to see what she looked like.

Even under the disadvantages of a cramped seat in a stage coach, when nearing the end of a long and tiresome ride, Miss DeLangdon

was a young lady who, once seen, demanded a second glance—and then, several more of them.

She had a faultless figure, that was well clad; and a glimpse of her cheek and throat was sufficient to make one desire a fuller view of the face which promised to be so beautiful as to be well worth the looking at.

So thought the young man, who, without staring steadily, or making his intention too plainly visible in his manner, kept himself on the alert for the moment when she would turn her face in his direction.

There was no particular bit of scenery that could claim her attention, and the young man had begun to think that she must be engaged very deeply with her own thoughts. Her shoulder was toward him; and one exquisitely gloved hand rested on the ledge of the window.

While he looked at the tapering fingers they began to move; and that, too, in a regular way that attracted his attention at once. If he was not mistaken they were making what might be called the dots and dashes of several letters in the telegraphic alphabet!

"MD, MD," said her fingers, as plainly as though the letters had been said aloud, though the tips of her gloves scarcely moved from the ledge on which they were resting.

The young man gave a start at the discovery. He did not believe it was chance; and those letters appealed to him. Without hesitation he placed his own fingers on the ledge at his side, and rapped out sharply, though scarcely believing that it would be heard, his answer:

"I—i—MD."

He had scarcely done so when he had no longer any doubt. The "call" ceased, and the fingers began to speak.

"Manton Dunleigh, I believe that you are my husband."

He was watching those taper fingers narrowly and read this singular message by sight rather than by sound. It might have been hard for him to say that he was certain of what had been said, but for that. When eye and ear both agreed, and the one was there to supplement the other, he could not be mistaken.

To say that he was astounded would be to say the very least that the situation called for. Had he suspected in the faintest degree what was to come he might have hesitated before answering to the call; and up to this he had almost imagined that the use of the initials, "MD," had been but a coincidence. It had been a number of years since any one had called him Manton Dunleigh.

Now, it did not take any deep thought to make out who this lady was. Her face came back to him as it was in the old times, and he wondered that he had not recognized it at once. There might be a woman who could repeat those words to him, though he had supposed that she had long since forgotten.

But this face was hardly the one that, in all the years that had elapsed since last he saw it, had begun to be but a hazy recollection. So he thought, at least, in the first moments of hesitation. And the girl of the past would hardly be expert enough with the telegraphic alphabet to undertake such a conversation. When he had known her she had not mastered the rudimental dots and dashes.

Of course, he felt no hesitation in staring straight at her now; and as he stared she turned so that her gaze met his squarely.

He had thought her handsome when he was taking a furtive view of her half-hidden face. Now, he thought she was more than handsome. If he had spoken his thought it would have been that she was divinely beautiful.

And as he looked, little by little there came back to him familiar lines; and he was willing to believe that this was, after all, the development of the girl that he knew in the long ago. He hesitated no longer but rapped out:

"Then you are Cleo DeLangdon."

The eyes that were meeting his own dropped slightly, as she bowed her head in what might have been a gesture of assent; while a smile played around her full lips. She was certain now that she had made no mistake.

"All right, then; go ahead!"

Dunleigh was an expert, but he rather wished that the conversation could be carried on directly. This would be slow; and sooner or later would attract the attention of Mrs. DeLangdon, if that lady once opened her eyes. He knew something about her past experience, and was aware that she was no good friend of his; yet he would sooner have run the risk of her recognizing him by his voice, than to have her suspicions aroused by this language of dots and dashes. She could not understand it; but, unless she had forgotten and forgiven, she would be apt to think there was but one man in the world who would be talking to her daughter after such a fashion.

The answer came promptly.

"It will not do to talk more here; but I must see you as soon as possible. There is much that I must say to you—for it was in the hope of meeting you that I consented to this journey. But be guarded. Mother is more suspicious than ever; and I have another husband who may turn up at any moment. He is dangerous, and I have hopes of one day seeing him hung; but, mean-

time, it will be well to be careful. If you can say something to her without her recognizing your voice I think that I can then venture to join in; but beware how you address me in her presence until you have first tried the experiment. Of course, you know whether it will be worth the risk. It might be better for the present to remain silent."

It took quite a time to spell all this over, and when the taper fingers rested quietly on the ledge the young man had made up his mind. He had heard before of this other husband, and would rather enjoy meeting him; but to arouse Mrs. DeLangdon was a different matter.

It was a little trying, for, to tell the truth, he was burning with curiosity; but he saw the profit in waiting. At present he could at best obtain but a half explanation, that would be more exasperating than none at all.

"Have it as you will. My mouth is closed until you open it. Then, I will have as much to say as you will be willing to hear. Good-by."

He could be as cool as the young lady. If this extraordinary meeting affected him at all he did not allow it to be apparent. He seemed to have been drumming idly on the ledge. Now, he sunk back on his seat, and closed his eyes. If he was not asleep in a few moments he was certainly deeply immersed in a day-dream.

As for the young lady, she also retained her composure, and there was nothing in the way that her gaze rested on him when she turned once more from the window, to indicate that she considered him anything more than the veriest stranger. Her eyes closed, also; and soon it looked as though all the occupants of the stage were slumbering.

For a while things remained in this shape. Then—for the first time since they had been in the care of this driver—the stage gave a lurch that made a fair opening for one to think that a wreck was inevitable, and Mrs. DeLangdon woke with a little scream.

She clutched instinctively at the arm of her daughter; Cleopatra awoke also; and as the two stared around them in a bewildered sort of way they were conscious that they were being observed by a gentleman, who had an amused look, and that the stage was bowling along as smoothly as ever.

"Really, Cleo. What has happened?" asked the elder lady, unable to at once overcome her alarm.

"I expected that the vehicle was going to pieces, at the very least. That man must be utterly reckless, or he would have pulled up long enough to see whether any damage had been done. Suppose you call to him to stop and see."

"Not much use to do that. He probably knows his business better than we do, and would not take any hazardous risks. There was a hard jolt; but if we had been awake it would have probably passed unnoticed. Indeed, to me this seems to be a very careful driver, and we had not better show any want of confidence in his abilities for fear he will give us something to grumble over. He might be shaking us up a great deal more without running us into any positive danger."

Which was a true remark. Johnny understood his business as well as any man who ever handled a ribbon; and had been doing his best for the lady passengers. That one jar was caused by an outside passenger who had distracted his attention in spite of himself, and who, for the remainder of the trip, was treated with a coldness that showed how deeply he had sinned.

As Mrs. DeLangdon did not seem at ease, however, and still insisted that, after such a shock, it was more than likely some damage had been done to the coach, Dunleigh saw the chance for which he had been waiting.

"If you feel nervous, madam, I can bring him to a halt; but the fact is, these fellows who are on the road day in and day out can tell by the swing of the hearse the instant anything has gone wrong; and I assure you they are as careful of their precious necks as if they were of more value than the rest of the world would be willing to admit. The road is in good order here, and the man appears to be anxious to make time. The agents have held up several coaches of late; and it is as like as not that he wants to pass through the dangerous places a little ahead of time. I do not suppose there is really much danger for us, as they have so far been remarkably well informed, and only held up those stages that carried plenty of treasure; and when they got the box, skipped without waiting to bother the passengers. You have probably heard of them?"

"Them? I do not think I catch your meaning. Is there any danger?"

"Excuse me for having used the vernacular. Out here we call highwaymen road-agents; a stage is more generally known as a hearse; and the treasure-box is really the forwarding safe of an Express Company, in which is carried the gold of the miners, which is being shipped away from the mines. Personally, I do not think there is any danger, but if General Gloom should strike us, and find that the Express Company had nothing on board, he would be apt to collect

a goodish sort of toll from us passengers. But it is a law of the ilk to do their spiriting gently when there are ladies present; and should he call a halt, all that you will have to do will be to hand over your valuables, and depart in peace."

When he had ceased speaking, the young man was certain that he remained unrecognized by the lady he had been addressing; and having passed the first part of the ordeal successfully, had little fear of the rest. He understood the changes that time had made in him, and was sure that the longer she looked at him the less likely she would be to call his features to mind.

Mrs. DeLangdon was thinking of something else, and was not interested in people she had known in the past.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed. "I hope they will not make their appearance. I have but little money about me, but it would be a dreadful thing to be plundered. They might do me great damage, without benefiting themselves in the least. Is—is there never any resistance made on such occasions?"

"Never—when ladies are present. Lead at random is no respecter of persons; and the community at the next stopping place would probably hang a resisting passenger—if the road-agents did not—should any damage be done to one of the fair sex through his folly. Out here we are nothing if not gallant."

"Oh, dear! I think I would be willing to run a great deal of risk, provided there was a fair chance of beating the robbers off. I would have very little regard for the gallantry of the man who would see two unprotected females robbed."

"Very well, madame. If it will be any satisfaction to you the effort can be made. In case the road-agents put in an appearance, I will resist. When the shooting begins, I would advise that you get down on the floor, and remain there until the trouble is over. It will be sultry, quite sultry, while it lasts, and—Ah! I think they are here now. Listen, and you will hear their hail, if I am not much mistaken."

And sure enough, as they were rounding the bend, there was the sound of a pistol-shot, followed by the order of hands up, as has already been recorded.

General Gloom was around, and ready for business.

CHAPTER V.

LUCKY LESTER KEEPS HIS WORD.

AT the appearance of danger, Mrs. DeLangdon began to realize that perhaps there was no jest in the dry statements of the young man. Resistance did not seem such a simple matter as it had done a few minutes before. Cooped up in the limited area of the stage, only a miracle could keep them all from being riddled with bullets if the firing ever began; and she imagined that that first shot had brought down the driver. She threw up her hands appealingly as she leaned toward the young man.

"Don't exasperate them! I will take it back. I see that resistance is of no use. Perhaps—forget what I told you. They may overlook some things altogether. If not—better to lose than to die."

"Very well. As you wish. And yet, we may have to be guided somewhat by circumstances. This Gloom is a singular rascal; if anything, too fresh for his business. Somebody will have to bring him up with a round turn. We shall see what we do see."

The young man spoke as coolly as though there was no danger at hand; and his calmness had something of a reassuring effect on Mrs. DeLangdon, who did not note that while his words were addressed to her his attention was given to her daughter. There was something in the start she had given at the sound of the road-agent's voice that seemed to Manton Dunleigh to be born of more than the surface of the situation.

Under the circumstances it was natural enough that Cleo should pale a little; but not that she should bend forward in an effort to obtain a view of the outlaw leader. Had there been nothing more than fright at the attack it would be more natural for her to cower back.

There was not much time for observation, however. The driver and the outside passengers had promptly thrown up their hands, and General Gloom was not disposed to wait long for a response from those within. He proposed to push things now that he had them moving.

"Here, you, outside! You listen to me whistle. Johnny, hold on to the ribbons, keep your break down, and your hands well up. If the horses move a step over you go. And the rest of you climb down only too quick, and get yourselves in a line here, along the trail. There are a round dozen of us watching, and at the first bit of crooked work we begin to shoot. If there is anybody inside that wants to step down and out, they can be doing it while the rest of you are getting into position. If not, we'll look after their cases later on—and it may be the worse for them. Get up the move, now, or we'll be doing it for you."

The passengers on the outside seemed to have a wholesome regard for their safety, for they scrambled down, and ranged themselves into line, to the number of four. Every man had his

hands up over his head, and made no remarks. It was simply the regular thing to do, and they accepted the situation. The fact that so far they had seen no one made no difference. They had heard the voice, and that was all that was required.

"Lads of sense, all of you. It will be all the better for you. Now then, Johnny, what have you got inside? Better speak the truth in the send-off, because it won't be long before we will know the facts in the case, and can act accordingly."

"There's two ladies inside, and a young man. That's every blessed one; and I reckon they won't give you much trouble, unless they are a blasted sight bigger fools than I take 'em for. Young man's a-settin' on ther front seat, an' I guess he's only too skeered ter come out. Ax him ag'in, an' I reckon you'll fetch him."

"Thank you, Johnny," said a voice from within. "That's about the truth of it. I didn't want to jump till they had time to see who was coming. Here I am; and I suppose that if I come it will be enough. The ladies don't feel much like it. If you hand the collection-box in through the window, they will put in their share, no doubt, and the coach can go on. It's some distance to the Flat, and it would be a shame to take any more time to the job than is necessary. The night air will be bad for their lungs."

The young man stepped out briskly, and took his position in the line, with his face to the front.

"All correct! Every man on the way-bill is accounted for. Keep your hands up, and this thing won't hold you here much longer. But, if there should be any shooting, or other nonsense from the hearse, the boys here will try the Winchesters on it, and riddle it, too, quick. The line can stay as it is; we will pay our addresses to the ladies first."

Mrs. DeLangdon had recovered all her self-possession, and was noting keenly everything that was going on. She heard the speech of the young man with more anger than dismay. It seemed to her that he was calling special attention to their ability to contribute, when she had just confided to him the fact that they had little or nothing to give.

"The wretch!" she exclaimed, turning to her daughter. "He is trying to make trouble for us; probably to screen himself. They will not believe that I have not a dollar."

For answer Cleopatra held up her hands. "He seems to be pretty well provided with this world's goods; and to be not too intent on holding to them. He tossed a goodly portion in this direction, probably for us to use as a peace-offering with which to appease the wrath of this General Gloom. The question is, shall we use it?"

"Of course," answered Mrs. DeLangdon, with promptness. "If we had as much of our own we would have no hesitation in handing it over, and we can consider this as a loan. The loss will be no greater. How much is there?"

"About a hundred dollars. You had better be the purse-bearer, then, as it will seem more natural. And I am afraid that I am not up to the interview with the man in the bushes. I wonder if there are as many of them as they would have us think?"

She laughed shortly as she spoke. So far, there had been nothing visible but the one flash, when the wheel-horse was brought down. It would be a joke if there was only one man engaged in the business.

But, as she gave a glance out of the window she saw that the conjecture was an erroneous one. Now that the possibility of danger was over, General Gloom and his satellites hesitated no longer to make their appearance. To the number of a round dozen they came into view, showing that, however careful the general might be, it was not for want of a force sufficiently large to leave in no doubt the result, if it came to a fight with the average stageful of passengers.

Five of the outlaws turned the muzzles of their rifles in the direction of the line of passengers who stood at some little distance from the coach, while six of them paid strict attention to the vehicle itself, though they could there expect to find no one who was not strictly a non-combatant.

The Twelfth man was Gloom himself. He advanced carelessly, though he carried a ready revolver, and under the eyelets of a mask a pair of black orbs were ready to note the slightest movement of an aggressive nature. Gloom had been in the business some time, and had never been known to throw away a chance.

"Excuse the familiarity, ladies," was his salutation, as he stood at the coach window, at which Cleopatra was seated; "it is one of the necessities of the profession, and is entirely within the line of business. Have I the pleasure of addressing either Mrs. DeLangdon or her daughter?"

"It is hardly necessary to answer the question," responded Cleopatra, thrusting through the window a hand that was well-filled with notes and gold. "We are two ladies traveling alone, and should be sacred from molestation. As it seems that we are not, at least we might

be spared needless questioning. Here is our entire fortune. Take it, and much good may it do you if we can now be allowed to go in peace."

"Peace be with you, my child!" answered the chief, with a low bow over his extended hand. "I would raise my hat if I had more than two hands. Being an ordinary mortal, I do the best I can. The cash is very acceptable, and the amount will be strictly deducted from the face of the note for thirty days, which we will feel ourselves called upon to ask for. Meantime, rest yourselves in patience till I return. I may as well collect the offerings from these gentlemen, who seem ready and anxious to contribute to the good cause. The total amount expected from you—and which we really must have—was one thousand, which I have means of knowing can be spared without any strain on your resources. In round numbers there are a hundred here. You can make the order payable to bearer, and for nine hundred. If you have no writing materials, my secretary will be happy to furnish you with whatever may be needed."

"You have a singular idea of what peace is. If we refuse to sign any such document, then what?"

Cleo spoke briskly, but without either the fear or the indignation which might have been expected.

"In this benighted country a plain cook receives the insignificant sum of twenty dollars; but it is the only situation I can offer. You must see that at that rate it will take some three or four years to work out the indebtedness. Consider the matter until my return."

The general bowed once more, and stepped jauntily away toward the head of the little line of male passengers, silently awaiting him.

One after another they confided to his keeping the contents of their purses and pockets, until he came to the young man from the inside, who watched his near approach with a smile.

In front of him the general stopped, and turning his head sideways inspected him for a moment.

"Wolf could hardly eat dog, and if I mistake not we are in pretty much the same line of business. As they cleaned you out fairly well at Glory Gulch you can hardly have more than a starter. Keep on to the Flat, my worthy friend, and may you live long, and prosper according to your deserts. A gentleman so well known as Lucky Lester is entitled to some consideration, even at the hands of a road-agent. Especially, when he holds up his hands like a little lamb. I confess I expected that you would open on us with both hands; and if it had not been an actual necessity we would have given up this job had we heard that you got on board the hearse at Walnut Bar. That will do. We can trust you to make no trouble till you meet some one less discreet than General Gloom and his minions."

"That depends on how things are run from this time on. Soft words butter no parsnips, and I have interests of my own to look after. I hope they will not clash with yours; if they do, you can't expect me to let go of my grip. If I did I might lose my luck, and that would be the end of me."

"As how?" asked Gloom, somewhat enigmatically.

"I have constituted myself the protector of the ladies, and anything like harshness will be met in kind. Your men have me covered. Granted. But I hold the drop on you and as you know me so well—what is there to save you if I crook my finger? I am ready for the chances if you push me to the test."

And the hands of Lucky Lester were both in his side pockets, and resting on the pair of derringers that always lay there.

CHAPTER VI.

UNCLE BEDROCK TAKES ADVANTAGE.

If it had been an ordinary individual who had uttered the threat it is more than likely that Gloom, surprised though he was, would have run the risks, and either tried a snapshot himself, or given his men an order to fire if the man did not again elevate his hands.

But, Lucky Lester was known to be equal to his reputation; and that was something phenomenal. It made even General Gloom hesitate. This man had never been known to utter a threat which he did not mean; and had taken desperate chances so often that it seemed as though he must bear a charmed life. Perhaps it was not the danger to himself that made the outlaw hesitate, so much as the feeling that in the end the other would escape. If he blamed himself for having allowed this superstitious feeling to interfere in the first place, and so give the chance for Lawrence, as he called him, to gain the advantage, it was too late now to alter it. The derringers that he was certain covered his heart had never been known to miss their aim, and no doubt there was little time to think.

"You hold over me, pard," he answered quietly. "When I have treated you white, and trusted to your honor, it is hardly the square thing for you to spoil business. But, up go my

hands, and you can tell us just how you want this thing run. And, perhaps, by and by General Gloom will have the opportunity to get even."

"I don't want to run your affairs, or even to interfere with what you call business; but I do mean to say that the ladies must be treated with all due respect, or I will be inquiring the reason why they are not. You said something about a thousand dollars. If they don't care to give their note, mine will have to do. It is not often that I have occasion to use paper; but as you remarked, the boys at Glory Gulch managed to clean me out so well that if my luck had not run in a little at the last moment I would not have had enough for a starter when I got to Ginger Flat. The cards have commenced to come way again, however; and it will not be long to wait."

"And so you think you can get away with me on that basis? I really don't see how you propose to do it, unless you are going to take the whole lot of us out of the damp before the hearse starts again. Why, man alive, you must be crazy."

"Not a bit of it. You have made your offer, and now I am going to see that you stick to the letter of the contract, and when that is satisfied the ladies go on unmolested. Isn't that a fair and square thing, all around?"

"Not so fair and square as you may think, perhaps, but—by heavens, we will let it go at that. Your paper is not as strictly gilt-edged, in a negotiable sense, but it is just as sure to be paid. Truce it is, for the present, on those terms. When I have my thousand in either shape proposed, you can all go on your way rejoicing, and I will wait till the next time to get even."

"That's on your word of honor, is it?"

"As between man and man it is."

"Honor goes, then. Hurry up with your arrangements, and if the ladies won't buy their way through come back to me. I never do anything by halves, and when I once say a thing it is meant for all time. Only, don't waste any more time. I am in a hurry to get to Ginger Flat; and so are they."

The ladies in the coach were watching this bit of by-play with a mystified curiosity. They could understand that something was happening which was not down on the bills; but, as the conversation was carried on in a low tone, they could not understand what it could be. If Mrs. DeLangdon had known that Lucky Lawrence was making that resistance he had pledged to her, in spite of her afterward-expressed desire that nothing of the kind should be done, she would have been very much surprised at the cool, quiet way in which it was being done; and still more so that this stranger should put himself in such positive danger for two persons she was certain he had never seen before. It was her daughter who suspected something of the kind, though she kept it to herself, and closely watched the two men, expecting at any moment to see something desperate.

When General Gloom turned toward them once more, Cleo was still undecided as to what they had been having a controversy over, or on whose side was the advantage. Lucky Lawrence seemed perfectly at his ease, while the outlaw presented himself with as much effrontery as ever.

"Well, ladies, how is it? Have you decided upon the best way to raise that little matter of a thousand? It seems hardly possible that a lady with the acknowledged good sense of Mrs. DeLangdon would either hesitate or be at a loss."

Cleo understood better than her mother the sarcasm which lay in that remark; nor was she surprised to hear the elder lady respond in tones that were sharply emphatic:

"I have too much good sense to think of paying out money that I have not got; and I will not promise that which I am not certain of being able to perform. I have—or my daughter has for me—handed to you all the funds that I could; for any more from me you have neither prospect nor promise. If you cannot be content with what you have already garnered, do your worst."

"Thanks, madame, for not attempting to darken counsel by words without wisdom. I can understand your platform without another word of explanation, and will allow you to stand on it. Yonder gentleman has convinced me that his paper is as good as yours for all practical purposes, and I shall accept his obligation. If you choose to settle with him you can do it at your leisure. It will be none of my business. Although he is at present as impecunious as yourself, yet there is no doubt but that in a few days he will be able to arrange for his note; and you can be thankful that you have such a valiant champion to look after your interests."

"That gentleman?" exclaimed Mrs. DeLangdon, looking in the direction indicated. "It is very singular that he should be willing to concern himself with my affairs, since he is certainly an utter stranger to me. Who is he? From the way in which you speak of him you seem to have some knowledge in regard to the young man, and I would like to know if he is one at whose hands I could accept a favor."

"A man of luck is the most I know of him," replied the outlaw.

He did not appear at all surprised at the lady

opening a conversation with him—probably he had had a good deal of experience in regard to the distance which feminine curiosity will carry the sex. He gave a muffled sort of laugh from under his mask, to be sure; but as the lady did not seem to notice the disrespect, he went on.

"I believe that his name, at the present speaking, is Lester Lawrence, and he is generally known as Lucky Lester. He dabbles in cards, racing, and such matters, and generally comes out all right in the long run; but his luck principally consists in always getting away with the other man when it comes to pistols for two, or for a dozen. I confess that unless I was very sure that in some way or other his luck had hoodooed, I would not like to try conclusions with him myself. And he is also quite a gallant. Hope for your sake that he will not turn his attention toward your charming daughter. I have some pretensions in that direction, myself, although this is not the time or place to urge them. In regard to that I will see you later. Possess your soul with patience for a few moments longer, and I think you will be able to proceed. It will not take long to finish the business with him."

"But, wait, sir! Really, I cannot—"

"Help yourself, my dear madame. The matter is now out of your hands, and Lawrence and I can settle it in a minute, by the watch. That will do. Don't make me regret my leniency, or it may be worse for all of us."

General Gloom stepped away without waiting to hear the rest of the protest, and Mrs. DeLangdon turned to her daughter in a towering rage, to find that Miss Cleopatra was most certainly laughing, though at what she was not so sure.

At all events, the young lady had every appearance of one who had been vastly amused, and the indignant protest of her mother was quite lost on her. Though she spoke harshly enough, and wanted to know what under the sun she had seen or heard to laugh about, she got no explanation; and just when she began to insist, a movement of the passengers toward the stage showed that the stock operation of General Gloom was, for the present, closed. As the outsiders began to scramble up to their places she cast a glance out at the scene, and noted that the road-agents had already disappeared. They were prompt enough to move away when once their work was over. The driver was busy rearranging his horses, taking out the wheelers, to leave the dead one by the roadside.

Lucky Lawrence strolled carelessly toward the coach; and she looked at him in a way that ought to have set his teeth on edge if he saw the glance. She evidently intended to speak as he settled back in his seat, for she opened her mouth after the fashion of a woman who was about to deliver an oration.

But, just as Johnny had gathered up his lines, and was about to flourish his whip, there came a hail from the bushes into which the outlaw had retired.

"Ho! Ho! Jest a weary minnit, Johnny!"

Johnny paused. He was not sure what was wanted; but until he was out of gunshot range he was inclined to be obedient. He was somewhat surprised, and more disgusted, when Uncle Bedrock came strolling into view, carrying with him his bundle and stick, and leisurely beckoning as he came.

"Ther fun's all over, an' ther gin'ral kindly allows I may perceed. He found me a poor waif by ther roadside, an' took pity. He sez, han'le me with keer, an' put me safe down at Ginger Flat. Ther next time he meets yer he'll settle about me fare—unless you hed sooner hev him kim back an' talk to yer about it now."

Johnny looked the tramp all over. Nine men out of ten would have let the lash fall, and left the tramp to his fate.

Johnny, however, was the tenth man. There was not time for Gloom to have made a change in his garments, and to come back at him in disguise, but he suspected that this was a plant of some kind, and that for the present it would do no harm to allow it to be worked for what it might seem to be worth. If the fellow got into trouble by and by he would not be the worse for it.

"All right! You climb up hyer an' keep quiet. What Gloom says are apt to go in such cases, but I don't jest think you supposes you'll be ther most populer person on ther craft. You kin take yer chances ef yer' willin', an' ef it's a hemp neck-tie don't growl at me fur kerryin' yer inter danger. All right, ag'in! Hyer we go."

And this time there was no interruption, but as the lash fell the horses started away, and behind them in triumph rode the impecunious tramp, who had listened to the thinly veiled threat without the slightest sign of being troubled by it.

Of course, the other passengers, both outside and in, had full opportunity to hear the conversation; and Lucky Lester seemed to be amused, and yet, for some reason or other, he was also angry.

Miss DeLangdon caught the dry smile on his lips, and as the late unpleasantness had made them all acquainted in a natural sort of way, had no hesitation in speaking of it.

"The great Mogul who handles the lines seems to think discretion is advisable in this case. Can that man be one of the gang, sent along to see what will be done about the robbery?"

"Oh, the fellow is just what he seems—or was, not long ago, though he may now be something more. The rascal would take the chance of getting his neck stretched—and in this case it is a remarkably good one—for the sake of getting a free ride for a few miles. Then, again, it is quite likely that he has been pressed into service by the road-agent captain, who has sent him along to look after the ransom he is to receive. This Gloom is a very careful fellow. He don't intend to run the risk of losing any money he considers he has once made; and no doubt he would think it worth his while to get reports from time to time of how the game runs; and be in condition to present his paper the first chance he hears of for its liquidation. The pointer would be worth money to him according to his view; and this fellow is to get it. And that is what makes me mad. If he knows anything about me—as he says he does—he ought to be aware that I will do as I promise. If he crowds too hard I shall be compelled to go gunning for him myself; and then he will have to come down."

"And you are really the gentleman he said you were—Lucky Lester? And you gamble, and fight, and are a bad man generally? How strange that I should meet one of the class! Do you know, I have long had a curiosity to come across some one of that stamp, just to see if the reality equals the ideal. It seems strange, for, looking at you, one would never have suspected anything of the kind."

Under other circumstances Mrs. DeLangdon would have been both listening and horrified. But she was thinking of something else. The road-agents had given her a sensation, and she was too full for utterance. If she had heard she would put a stop to what, to any but the parties concerned, would have seemed like a piece of gratuitous insolence to a man who had just risked a good deal on account of herself and daughter.

Lucky Lester understood, however. There had been something of a change in him; and he had been the last man she would have dreamed of ever being a man of chance, or a person with a record.

"You know the old adage—something to the effect that one who is unlucky in love can be sure of a winning streak at cards. Probably that accounts for the singular phenomenon. You will find more wrecked lives out here than anywhere else on the Continent; and on every one of them, so far as I know, there is the mark of a woman's hand."

The answer was not what Cleo expected, but it did not confuse her, though the glance with it gave it a personal application. She frowned slightly as she turned her eyes toward her mother, in what might be interpreted as a warning, while, in a tone somewhat lower, she continued:

"You have been hearing only one side of the stories. If the ladies were on the ground to speak, they would no doubt have something to say about those wrecks. I think I know of one man wandering in the West who ran his ship on the rocks, regardless of cargo, passengers, or anything else. Perhaps he was blind. If so, that was no excuse. He ought not to have undertaken to be a captain unless he was sure of himself. I have no pity for him, at all events."

"And probably he needs none," was the quick answer. "After the first shock is over, there is a good deal of solid enjoyment to be got out of being a wreck. And they are sometimes the men for the occasion. So General Gloom thinks, no doubt."

"And this General Gloom—who is he? Is he another of your wrecks? It seems suspicious that you should be so well acquainted with each other; though that may be only because I see with eyes that are unused to the ways and works of this 'glorious' country."

CHAPTER VII.

UNCLE BEDROCK EXPLAINS HIS POSITION.

MRS. DELANGDON caught the name of Gloom, and it brought her out of her reverie. She turned sharply toward her daughter.

"Cleo, it is not worth while to discuss him. It is to be hoped that we have seen the last of him; and if we have not, gossip at the present time will not mend the matter. You annoy me with your chatter. Wait until I am not present if you desire to ask questions about a man who is really not fit to be mentioned."

"Anything for the sake of peace. I am dumb—for the present."

And Miss DeLangdon threw a look at Lawrence, which plainly told him that she had a great deal to say at some other time.

Lucky Lester did not attempt any response; and though he was on his defense, he simply bowed. Then he looked out of the window again, and the three rode on in silence.

As a result, they could hear quite plainly the voice of Uncle Bedrock, who had found in one of the passengers a man who knew him well,

though he did not appear to be overpowered at the meeting.

"Oh, Gloom are jest that sorter a feller. Can't say ez he's a ole side pard ov mine, 'kase it mout not be healthy; but I kin say I knowed him ov old, afore he ever come out hyer ter make a name fur hisself. An' a mighty big name it are, that he's writ up on ther page ov hist'ry. Fur two year he's bin makin' things lively 'long this hyer trail, and not er wunst hez he bin ever taken in. Perobably it's on account ov his jin'rous charakter, w'ich makes frien's outen ther men he strikes kinder easy like. Toe be sure, he's bad ez ther wust when he gits r'iled; but it takes a heap ter r'ile him, an' I've knowed him ter loan a man a quarter what hed jest tried a snap-shot at him, an' hedn't missed him very fur, either. An' now, jest look at me. Hyar I war, tired, ragged an' dirty, 'thout a pair ov coppers ter jingle in me empty pocket. Takin' things as they run nat'ral, an' how war I ter git ter Ginger Flat? Foot-back, in course. Whar are ther any other man ez come acrost me, a-reclinin' by ther roadside, ez would ever thought so far ez ter boost me inter a ride when that war ther chance ter do it free, gratis, fur nothin'? But Gloom, he thought. He turns ter me ez he war hidin' in ther bush, an' says he: 'Uncle, ye'r too ole a man, an' too good a man, ter be prancin' 'round ther country a-foot-back. Jest you git aboerd that stage, an' tell 'em I sent yer. If any one kicks I'll be wantin' ter know ther reason why.' That's what I call white, blame me ef I don't."

"White it are, ole man; but, same time, I wouldn't go ter shoutin' it 'round too much, 'cause General Gloom have some real bad enemies, that might think it w'ith while ter, hit you ter make him squeal. Afeard I be thet it's too late fur that advice, ez some little bird's a-kerryin' what you said, no doubt; and it'll be all over ther camps afore mornin'. Better hold yer potater-trap shut tight, tell yer gits whar they don't know nothin' ov Gloom an' his agints."

"Oh, ef they know ov Gloom, they've also heard ov Uncle Bedrock. Fur years 'thout number he's bin knowed ez ther squarest kind ov a white man, ef he are down on his luck now an' then. Can't go inter no minin'-camp, frum A ter Ampersand, but they'll tell yer—'Bedrock, he's a lily-white man, but drefful unlucky. What he says, tie to; an' ef yer kin spare ther change, loan him a quarter.' Yer hev'n't got that small amount convenient, hez yer?"

"Say, come now," responded the other traveler, in some disgust. "Yer wouldn't be tryin' that game on me? I haven't got no quarter; an' ef I hed I'd hole on ter it tell it squealed afore I'd let it go your way. Haven't found that son o' yourn yit, I reckon?"

The tramp heaved a sigh.

"Not yit; but onc' I war mighty nigh on ther track. Ef I could 'a' found some bernivolint ole man ez would 'a' loaned me a quarter er two, er maybe a half a dozin, I might ar reached him. But I hed ter go it afoot, an' afore I got thar it war too late. Mebbe ther chance'll never come ag'in, but I'm doin' ov me dooty, an' ef I miss ther boy fur good an' all, it's not fur ther fault of not lookin' fur him."

"Yer thinks it likely he'll turn up at Ginger, does yer? Hope he will, but I don't jest suppose ther chances are ez good ez fur ther world ter come ter an end. Suthin' sing'ler 'bout that boy; an' ef I hedn't heared yer speakin' ov him with my own two ears I wouldn't 'a' believed thar war sich a individu'l. Guess he'll be mighty proud and happy ter see yer; an' ef he's well heeled, guess you'll make up fur lost time right lively. Lookin' fer him seems ter hev taken yer mind off'n fun, an' whisky, an' all sich pleasant subjects."

The broad irony had no effect on the tramp. He appeared to take it all as *bona fide*; and sighing again, proceeded to explain something more about his quest, which, according to his statement, had lasted for a long time, and had been carried on with untiring industry.

"Thar's one thing, Uncle Bedrock, that yer allers furgot ter mention, an' that was, ther name ov that same boy," said the man, after the tramp had for some time dilated on the ways of the world, and sorrow for his missing offspring, who was bringing the gray hairs of his father in sorrow to the grave.

"Same ez mine; same ez mine," was the hasty answer. "Everybody 'round hyer knows who Rufus Primrose is; and if he don't kerry ther same han'le I sh'ud wonder."

"Does seem kinder curious like; but it strikes me I hev heared ov another, though, blame me, ef I ever thought ov it afore; er, rather, I thort it war all ther same pussan—ef I thort anything about it at all. Jest sich a wu'thless cuss ez you be, red nose an' all, 'ceptin' he war ter all accounts about twenty year ther younger, more er less. How'd that strike yer? You an' him go in ez pards, eh?"

"Dunno ez I onderstand yer," responded Uncle Bedrock, drawing him-elf up with as near an approach to dignity as he could muster. "Notwithstanding ther fact thet yer uncle hez got down ter bed rock, an' through ther infloens ov a onerduledated bad luck, w'ich hez bin pursoolin' him fur ther most ov his pilgrim-

age thro' this wale ov tears, he hez ther pu'plerest of blood in his veins, an' ef yer heared ov a son ov his it would be ov a gentleman an' a scholar. Ez Rufus Primrose, you see afore yer ther representative ov a long line ov aristocrats, w'ot onder a different order ov things w'u'd be dooks an' princes. Ez Uncle Bedrock yer sees a man thet stands alone, ther on'y one ov his kind; ther great, American traveler; ther pernambulatin' exponent ov Old Time's rocks. But me boy—ah, would he kim down ter sich ez those? Nary time, not any! Go whar he will, an' meet w'ot fortune he may, he'll be a Primrose, an' a flower in ary flock."

"Glad yer think so," retorted the other, who seemed to take some delight in rubbing the fur of his fellow-traveler the wrong way.

"But ef yer are on ther level ov truth an' veracity, don't yer kinder b'lieve it would be a dog-gone pity ef yer war ree'lly ter meet him? Would be a kinder a shock ter a gentleman ov means ter strike sich a condemned ole reprobate, an' hev him call him dad. But I've give ye a pointer, an' ef yer don't choose ter take it it ain't my fault. An' it strikes me, now thet I think about it, that ther other Primrose war inquirin' fur his father—w'ich might mean you. Eh, Uncle Bedrock? How does that strike yer?"

"It strikes me thet I sh'ell hev ter administer pussonal punishment ef yer keeps it up much funder. W'en it comes ter makin' game ov a man's holiest emoshuns, an' trompin' on a wreck 'cause he ain't got a ank'rage ter wind'ard, it's gittin' nigh ter time ther drawr ther line; an' I'm apt ter drawr it with this."

And with a flourish Uncle Bedrock produced the same revolver into which Johnson, the road-agent, had been looking less than an hour before.

It was rather close quarters in which to flourish fire-arms, and the production of the weapon was not greeted with delight by the other passengers, who began an indignant protest, but the man for whose benefit it was introduced did not seem at all concerned.

"Oh, come, now, Uncle, be 'azy—an' if ye can't be 'azy be ez 'azy ez ye kin. You know you wouldn't shoot anybody, nohow. And me! The only man that can set you straight on the road when you get to Ginger Flat—go 'way snakes! I'm ez safe ez a mouse in a church—more by pity ther ain't more churches er less mice. You know I war jest a foolin' with yer; an' now I give it to yer straight. I did hear ov a man named Primrose; but, young er old, ragged er in broadcloth, guv'nor er bum—blame me ef I know any thing about him! I war ther name thet struck me; thet war all. Ez like ez not you'll find him at ther Flat, an' then you kin judge fer yourself."

"And that are good goods, straight from the loom?"

"Honest Injun!"

"Then give us yer hand, pard. Fur all ther weary years I bin a-trampin', an' a-axin', it's ther first time I got a reel glimp' ov sunlight. Ef I do find him, money can't reward yer, an' I'll try ter think ov suthin' better."

"Yer thanks'll do well enuf, 'thout shakin' han's. I washed mine a week er so ago, an' don't want ter git em dirty ag'in, afore I git home. But I say, pard, mebbe that's him, now."

Before Uncle Bedrock could follow the direction of the pointing finger there was a hail from the roadside.

"Hoi, thar; hole on! Hyer's yer Onkle Bedrock, on ther way ter Ginger Flat; can't yer take him along?"

CHAPTER VIII.

ANOTHER RICHMOND IN THE FIELD.

THE man who stopped the coach was a fair facsimile of the tramp on top, and Johnny actually turned his head over his shoulder and took a look at Uncle Bedrock, to see if by any possibility he had been lost. At the same time he drew on the lines, and as his team was going at a slow rate, and had no great ambition to hurry the conveyance behind, that had an unaccustomed weight, the halt was a natural result.

"Sure ez yer lives, there's two ov a kind!" exclaimed the driver, looking from the one to the other, in some perplexity, and uncertain whether the second fellow, who advanced so confidently, was also checked by General Gloom for a free passage.

"Two er a doozen, w'ot's ther difference so they're all white? An' fur a man ov that color I don't know ary one thet kin lay over ther chap w'ot drives this hyer hearse. Thankee, Johnny! Crack 'em up. Ye'll late, anyhow, and I'm in a bit ov a hurry ter git ter ther Flat."

"Well, I swear!" exclaimed Johnny, who had been almost struck dumb by the coolness with which the second tramp had climbed up to the seat, which he appropriated with all the airs of a first-class passenger.

"This hyer hearse are run ter make money, an' a gent ez wants ter take passage jinerally pays his way afore he puts on style, an' owns ther hull outfit. Two dollars it is ter Ginger Flat, an' ef yer can't plank ther ready yer may jest ez well git down at fu'st as at last. Natter step do yer ride afore I see ther color ov yer money. You hear me remark?"

"An' it's to ole Onkle Bedrock thet sich langlewidge are addressed? To ther man w'ot's ez honest ez ther rising sun, an' hez traveled nigh on ter ez fur in his time? Fur a beggarly two dollars you'd leave his mangled corpus ter rot by ther way-side, w'ile you rode on rejoicin'? Oh, ther vanity an' vexashuns ov this hyer weary world! Ter think thet in ther days ov my declinin' age I should be talked to after that fashion! It's ernuf ter make a hog sick. Say, Johnny, loan me a quarter, an' whip up yer hosses, afore I make up me mind not ter fergive yer."

"Johnny," said Bedrock Number One, choking down his indignation as well as he could, though it made him gasp to do it, "don't yer do it! Don't yer give him a cent. It's cheek too amazin', an' ther' wouldn't be nothin' wrong ef I slugged him in ther' mouth, an' give him a whirl over ther hind end. Him Onkle Bedrock! An' me ther great 'rigernal, a-sottin' hyer, a-listenin' ov it! It makes me weak!"

The "great original" struggled with his feelings, and gasped, and gurgled, till it seemed as though he was about to go off into a spasm.

"Seems ter be took quite bad," said Number Two, who viewed the attitude of indignation with cool unconcern.

"W'en I git that way I put me head ter soak, an' say nothin' tell I drop ter ther ground floor ag'in. W'ot's ther matter with him, ary-how?"

"You just never mind what is ther matter with him, but pony out thet two dollars. It's ther last time ov askin', an' next time I'll talk to yer with this," and Johnny reversed his whip as he spoke, and shook the butt of it in the face of the tramp with a savage vehemence that ought to have been alarming, but without any visible effect.

It is uncertain what would have been the result had not interference come from beneath. Mrs. DeLangdon had uttered an exclamation of disgust, and her daughter looked inquiringly at Lucky Lester, so that the latter felt called upon to look into the trouble after his direct fashion. He leaned out of the window, and called up to the driver:

"It's time the funeral procession was once more on the march. If it don't start soon, and make up a little of the lost time when it does, there will be trouble all around. Why don't you get a move on, Johnny?"

"Got a bloody pirate aboard, thet won't pay fare, an' won't get off. This hyer ve-hickle don't go a yard tell he does one er t'other."

"You are a bright one to run a stage. Time is money with us. How much is the amount?"

"Jest two solid, round, silver dollars. No more, ner no less."

"In the name of heaven, go on then, and I'll pay the amount whenever you call for it! I'd sooner do that than get up there to slaughter you both, and have to do the driving myself. If that don't satisfy you there will be some dead meat lying around here, too, soon."

"That's all right—jest ez good ez wheat. Hyer she goes!"

The motion was resumed, and Lester sunk back into his seat, remaining silent for the rest of the journey. The young lady gave him no more opportunity for conversation, and he had no desire to address his observations to the mother.

In fact, nobody had much to say. The other passengers outside were busy wondering which was really the genuine article; and the two tramps looked askance at each other from under their brows, neither making more than a muttered remark.

There was considerable difference in their appearance, however. The first comer was troubled and indignant in mien, while the second was inclined to be jocular. Whatever his eyes said, there was a grin on his face, and now and then he gave vent to a chuckle that seem to come from the lowest depths of his capacious chest.

At all events, the stage reached Ginger Flat without further delay or adventure. Mrs. DeLangdon gathered her belongings about her, took her daughter by the arm as soon as they had stepped down from the vehicle, and entered the "Rising Sun" without a word of thanks or acknowledgment to the man who had been of at least some service to her. As they disappeared through the door Cleo flashed one backward glance at the man she had claimed as her husband, that told him as plainly as could be that their parting would only be for a season, if the matter was left to her decision.

"Of all strange things that could have happened this is the strangest," he thought to himself, giving a long look at the two as they passed out of sight. "It was only the last chance I took to come here, and as I was running to catch the stage I was thinking what a fool I was to be doing it. Was I? It shall not be long before I get some information in regard to the question. She looks like herself, and yet she has changed as much as I have. What is going to be the end of it all? Her mother is just what she was in the olden time; and I suspect if she dreamed of who I am, and what has already passed between her daughter and myself, would

be taking the back track by the first conveyance.

"But what in the name of all that is wonderful has brought the old lady here? Certainly, not the Swallow Tail business. There is a mystery of some kind, and if I mistake not it will not be long before she will want some one as an adviser in the ways of this very wicked section of the world. If she should come to me, now, what good advice I could give her! and what a champion her daughter would have—what a champion she must have! Before they have been here a day they will be apt to need one, for this is a mighty bad place for unprotected females who may be supposed to have money behind them. If General Gloom don't try to get in some more of his fine work I am mistaken in the man. And I mustn't forget that he holds an obligation of mine that has to be provided for. Lester, if you ever are to have luck, now is the time when you need the article. The wife of your bosom—who has never rested there, however—may require some provision to be made for her, and at the present state of your finances is not equal to any sudden drain that may be required. It won't do to let the grass grow under your feet, and the day will be exceedingly cold all around if something is not done immediate."

After some such fashion as this ran his thoughts yet he appeared to be looking about him, as if only half determined to enter the building, the doors of which still remained invitingly open, though the proprietor had escorted his lady guests into the house, and in his interest for their welfare had quite forgotten his other possible guests.

As he looked about he came back to life, however, on seeing the back of one of the tramps, who had started off at a rapid pace the moment the coach had stopped and he had time to dismount. As to which one it was Lawrence was uncertain, for when he turned to take a look at the other Uncle Bedrock he found that he too had disappeared. The fact was that the two had clambered down on opposite sides, and started off without a word to each other.

"Probably it is my two-dollar man. If I am going to set up for a benefactor after this fashion I will have to run a gold mine, sure. What sort of a game is there up between those two? If I had not my hands full for the future with Mrs. DeLangdon and her daughter it would be worth while to look after them, if it was only for the fun I can see would be in it. Perhaps I may have the chance to do it, anyhow. I wanted a word with the fellow before he got away, but I will have to wait for another opportunity now. Here goes for the Rising Sun, and the mysteries that are to be developed. It is to be hoped I am not going to be as crazy as I was more years ago that Cleo, perhaps, would care to mention, young as she looks."

By the time that Lester Lawrence, as he was to be known in this part of the world, had made the acquaintance of Timothy Jerkes, proprietor, the two ladies were in the privacy of their own little seven by nine room, refreshing themselves as best they might by the limited toilet arrangements found there, and the elder was saying:

"You had some conversation with him; did it not strike you that there was something familiar about that man they called Lucky Lester? I hardly know whether it was in his voice or his face; but, something told me that somewhere or other we have met. Do you think that he has followed us here, or knows anything of the business that has called me to this out-of-the-way place, where there seems to be more chance of danger than success?"

"If he knows anything I don't see where he got his information. Likely enough you have seen some one whom he reminds you of, since there are not so many types of men in the world; and, for that matter, we may have stumbled across him somewhere in our progress through this delectable country without knowing it, or taking more than a passing glance. Now that he has come nearer again you remember him. What difference, anyhow?"

"I am fully convinced that he is a dangerous man, and will have an evil effect on the hopes in which this journey has been made. He is no doubt worse than reported, and I wish that we had not met him."

"Don't forget that we owe him a thousand dollars. Evil or not, he was not slow in coming to our support when we needed him. Don't forget."

"I shall not, but I must know that he has actually paid the money before I will admit that I am indebted to him; and it would be better to deal directly with this outlaw. For all we know the two may be in collusion."

"Hardly. And the outlaw—did it strike you that there was anything familiar about him?"

"Certainly not. How could I when he was so closely masked; and his voice seemed disguised beyond all recognition?"

"True enough; and yet, I confess, there was something about him that did not seem altogether unfamiliar. If my guess is a right one we will see more of him before we are many days older. I entered a protest when this journey was begun, and I renew it now. If you are wise you

will throw up this wild-goose chase and start for home as soon as possible. If you do not I shall not answer for consequences."

"You are not required to. I have considered the risks and am willing to run them. I should have been better satisfied if I could have left you behind. As I could not I shall have to look out for both of us. The journey is now over, however, and henceforth it will be work. I only hope that we will find here the men for whom I must look. Without them I confess I would be stranded."

"Let us hope that they have arrived."

"We shall soon see. I shall make inquiries at once."

"I think we had better be looking after supper. If that fails us we are lost indeed."

"I agree with you there, and for once. We will look after that first of all."

CHAPTER IX.

THE TROUBLE AT THE GILDED CLAW.

LUCKY LAWRENCE enjoyed his supper, in spite of the mystery which had come up to bewilder his brain; and afterward he went out to survey the town without waiting to hear from the lady who had been pleased to call him husband. It was hardly worth while to pose as a silent waiter until Cleo's intentions were more fully developed; and as there was no telling what interruptions there would be to his business he lost no time in getting down to it.

Ginger Flat was like the average mining-town in most respects, and Lucky Lester found no trouble in finding the place for a man like himself to enter into business. There was no dearth of saloons of every sort and description, and with capital to suit the classes of customers who patronized them.

The "Gilded Claw" was about the style of place he wanted to visit, according to current report, so he obtained directions for finding it from the landlord. He strolled in through the open door, and by chance attracted little if any attention. Seated in one corner, he looked quietly about him, watching the players themselves more than their methods, for he was somewhat particular about the game that he picked up, and of his own choice seldom made a mistake.

At one end of the room there was a faro-table, around which stood at least a dozen players, all pressing the game in a way that betokened some cause for general excitement, and in the course of a few minutes' observation, Lester could see the reason. For once the bank was having the run of luck dead against it. Not a case, was it, where some favored mortal had taken a winning streak, but every better was winning, every time. Such a thing does happen once in an age; when it does, it must be luck and nothing else.

"Pity I wasn't in that," thought Lester, as he discovered the state of affairs. "My little shoestring would run up to a pretty figure in no time. But if I tried to come in now I would only break the luck and lose my coin. As long as he lets them dip into him like that it is pretty sure that they play a square game at the Gilded Claw—which is a point to jot down for future reference. Perhaps some of these gentlemen will be so accommodating as to lose on short-cards what they have won on the table. If so, Lucky Lester is the very man they want to meet."

There was no use to worry himself with regrets, however. The game had been running for some time, and so far no one not with it when the streak began had offered to join in. If some one had made a motion toward doing so it is likely that he would have been viewed with no friendly eye by those already tussling with the tiger. Gamblers are the most superstitious of men, and not one of them but would have thought it would hoodoo the luck to have a new hand in the game.

The players were all sorts, sizes and conditions; one or two of them looking like prosperous professionals, whom Lawrence thought he would like to meet, later on. And at the very end of the lot he was both surprised and amused to discover the old, original Uncle Bedrock, who was just as fat, ragged and unctuous as ever.

"There must be some mistake about that," thought Lester, as he looked the fellow over.

"Probably they won his money before they got a glimpse of him, and now that the luck has turned can't bar him out. If there is not trouble in the near future I am wide off. The old man never could get into society without making a mess of it."

Lawrence had hit near to the truth in his guess, for Uncle Bedrock had very cautiously started his betting over the shoulders of several of the men who were already deep in the game; and as he had struck into it just at the commencement of the streak against the bank it did not take him long to accumulate quite a pile of checks.

As he had started from a single chip, which he had obtained from one of the gamblers, it was only when his capital had become respectable in amount that he came boldly to the front, and planked down his ivories with a flourish.

The old man felt that he was playing on velvet, and rushed the game accordingly. It was not in human nature to expect that he could win every time; and yet, that was the system on which he was now working, for from

his first bet he had doubled every turn, until now he was very near to the limit.

When once Lucky Lester had placed eyes on Uncle Bedrock he did not pay much attention to any one else.

"For pure nerve he does just lay over the deck," muttered some one at his shoulder, and the voice somehow sounded familiar enough to cause him to look around.

There was nothing in the face of the speaker that he recognized. To all appearance he was an utter stranger. Still, Lester was not satisfied. He seldom made mistakes in such matters; and though he was unable to think where he had heard that voice before, he felt sure that he had not only heard it, but seen its owner. For that reason he said to himself:

"That fellow is in disguise; who can he be? I'm not taking care of the morals of Ginger Flat, but I'll lay even money that it is some one who daren't have his face seen. For half a cent I'd try and find out. I may be wrong, but if so it is about the first time."

Acting from some undefinable instinct he addressed the man, who, like himself, had not seemed to court observation.

"For a place like the Gilded Claw that is a pretty tough party to be crowding up on the flyer. They must be a perfect set of angels here, or they would find some way to bounce him—and they wouldn't cash in his chips after he went out of the door, either."

The man laughed a little harshly.

"The game's not done yet; and if he has anything left when they turn the box over, you bet they will find a way to get at it. Everything is square at the Claw—only, they don't let any one go away with their money."

"Why, they told me that I would find everything fair and above-board here. If that is the sort of a place it is I am glad that I held on a bit. You sure that you talk by card?"

"Sure as a man can be, for I have been here before. I only wish I could see my chance to get even; and that is what I am laying back for. If you see things begin to get lively take a friend's advice and keep out of the ruction. There will be more fuss than fun when the music strikes up and Long Bill is at the key-board. Don't you forget that, if you do get excited."

The man spoke with such an accent of truth that Lawrence began to think he saw the reason for his being there in disguise, although that did not help him any in finding out who the person really was. Lester had been careful not to let him know by his actions that he had any suspicions, but he was viewing him none the less narrowly.

Long Bill was not of the rougher class, in spite of his name. He was rather well dressed; and though his face was covered with a full beard, and his hair was so long that it reached down to his shoulders, all was well kept and perfectly natural.

His name was certainly appropriate, since he was over six feet tall, and though not attenuated, seemed slender on account of his unusual height.

But the name told Lester nothing. He did not remember to have ever met a Long Bill; and if he had heard of him he did not remember the fact. He gave the riddle up.

"All right, my friend. If you feel disposed to cover the floor with gore, wade in; and I will take a back seat till the fun is over. I am a stranger in town, and don't care to get in the mix. If the trouble will begin soon I'll wait and see how it ends; but it appears to me these people here are not the easiest in the world to climb, and if you want to get even you had better go very slow, and mighty cautious."

"Of course I will. Don't you suppose I can hold a horse? I'm just waiting for that bumner to start the ruction, and then I will wade in, sure enough. I don't want to take them foul, exactly; but a fellow that is trying to make a strike at the Gilded Claw must have the advantage just a little bit on his side, or, he'll never know what hurt him. Sabbe?"

"Yes, I sabbe," laughed Lester. "Guess that's the matter with all of us, no matter where we are. But, if you are waiting on Uncle Bedrock you had better prick up your ears, and have your hands ready. I think his ruction is coming now."

Sure enough: there were sounds of a suddenly coming storm, in the midst of which the bumner was placidly proceeding to double his last bet on the king, which card had already won three times in the deal.

"One minute, gentlemen," the dealer was saying.

"We don't often kick here, no matter how the game goes; but this time we do—and hard. My partner has just told me that this fellow is playing on a sleeper that he picked up, and that he never bought a chip in the house. We are running this game for our patrons, and as it looks as though they were going to break the bank this evening, they ought to have a chance at the coin this bumner is heaping up. It is a delicate thing to do after the game is started, but we have never had a cent of his money, and must bar him out if we want to do the square thing by the rest. We are willing to cash his checks as they lay; and then, if he don't go we are going to fire him out. You

hear me, Mr. Man—or whatever you call yourself? The Gilded Claw is not exactly the place for one of your style. There's the Hole in the Wall, around the corner, that would suit you to a dot. Better go down there and make them all happy. With that pile you ought to keep things moving there; and here you will only get moved yourself."

"Is he doing that to get rid of Bedrock? or is he only looking for an excuse to close the game till he can get into another streak, that don't get away with his small change quite so fast?" asked Lester, with one eye for Long Bill, and the other for the dealer.

"That last just hits the fact, and hits it hard. There's no mistake but the chap hoodooed the luck of the bank; but all the rest are in the swim with him; and Lem wants to have a new deck, and another hand at the box, before another turn is called. Now, then; will the man you call Bedrock go?"

"You listen and you'll hear what he thinks on the subject. I never saw the man that was more willing to talk for himself, and he'll give as good as he gets."

"Most noble dealer, and potent proprietor, ef yer humble servant knows hisself—which he thinks she does—thar won't be ary firing out tell ther deal are done an' yer Uncle Bedrock bez broke ther bank, all ter everlastin' bu'st. It's not offen ther ther chance fur a fortun' opens out afore ther eyes ov yourn trowly: w'en she does you bet she don't go over me shoulder. Ez fur firin'—ther less yer say 'bout that ther beter. Mebbe this hyer crowd don't know I brung ther luck w'en I stepped over the doorway an' 'a' bin a-sharin' it 'round ever sence? Ef it hedn't bin fur ther ole, 'rigernal, wbar would they 'a' come in at? Ef yer fires me yer orter fire ther rest out, right behind, an' give ther house ter ther dogs. Yer hed orter set up ther drinks fur ther house, an' raise the limit about twice ez high, ef ye are a-carin' fur them patrons ov yourn ez much ez ye'r tryin' ter let on."

"Oh, that's the sort of game you are going to try to work, is it? We don't want to be harsh with you, old man, but it's the last time of asking. You want to get a move on, and not wait long while you are doing it. My name's not Job; and if it was I couldn't take much more such back talk without doing something. You have heard our offer. Now, you can go out any way to suit yourself; but if you linger a little you will find yourself out, and not know how you went. Last time of asking; are you about ready to start?"

Uncle Bedrock hesitated. He had for him quite a fortune under his fist, and there was no telling how long the streak would continue. A single turn would reduce him to beggary once more. Was it better to make a certainty of what he had, or should he run the risks, and endeavor to keep in the game?

He had no time granted for thought. The gentleman behind the box was promptness itself. His eyes rested on the tramp probably while one could count a dozen; then he suddenly made a motion to his partner, who also acted as bouncer for the institution.

The motion was answered quickly enough, though at the time it was given the face of the one for whom it appeared to be intended was turned the other way. At any rate, the partner wheeled, and without attempting to pull himself together, flung himself straight at the back of the unprepared tramp.

Unprepared he may have been, but the fellow did not catch a weasel asleep, nor Uncle Bedrock totally off guard, for he wheeled suddenly, and let go with his fist as hard as he could drive.

CHAPTER X.

AN UNEXPECTED ANSWER.

UNCLE BEDROCK was a total stranger to the camp, and every one, or nearly every one, had taken it for granted that the old fellow was a non-combatant, and would not think of fighting as long as his heels were in good working order.

There was great surprise then, when the tramp struck; and more yet when Mike Willard tumbled. The gambler was known to be a good man, who seldom missed when he started out to bring in his game.

The dealer was leaning back from the table, a smile upon his face, as though he expected that there would be a little amusement for the house, and he would then go on with the game.

At this unexpected result he bent forward with a suddenness that was startling, and the next instant his hand came up from under the table.

He was very quick, but not so rapid that he got the drop on Uncle Bedrock. The latter must have been expecting some such move, for he was ready for it. The same revolver which had covered Mr. Johnson in the course of their conversation that afternoon, made its appearance, and the hammer was back when it came.

"Easy, Lemuel; very easy!" he drawled as the muzzle dropped into line. "Fur a pore, w'uthless shote, sich ez yer sees me, I've had a various 'sperience, an' I ain't offen taken off me guard. Perceed with yer leetle game; but remember ther ez ther keards now stand it's my lead, an' when I git me play made I don't allow you'll be in condish ter foller suit. I on'y got

one frien' hyer but he's a roarer. When yer pard gits up, him an' me kin fight it out; but you ain't no call ter chip in, an' ef yer does yer'll be runnin' a fearful ole reesk."

"His head is about level, and if there is no one else in this crowd that will stand up for fair play he can count on me to be around when he needs a man at his back," said Long Bill, stepping briskly forward.

"He's a pretty hard-looking case for a man to be backing, but he has the right on his side, and I don't see any man imposed on, by two or a crowd. If Mike can't bounce him you had better go on with your deal, and let the fellow stay where he stands. The money he puts on the table is as good as that of any other man, and it don't make any difference where it came from."

"And who are you?" exclaimed the dealer, turning sharply on the intruder. "The man is a fraud, and a tramp, and a dead-beat, and we don't have such cattle about the Claw. If we do, every decent man would kick. If you don't, it must be because you are of the same stripe."

"It makes no difference who I am, as long as I am here with money in my pocket, and willing to stay. This is a house for the public, and the tramp has his rights here as well as any one else. I am going to see that he gets them, and that's all there is about it. If you don't like that say you are ready and turn your gun this way as quick as you have a mind to. As long as you give me warning I don't care what your game is; I can meet it every day in the year, and go you one better. Somebody has got to back straight down here or there will be fun amazing."

It was his manner more than his words, even, that made the speech of Long Bill so peculiarly offensive; and as he stood with his hands perfectly empty, and no sign of any weapon about him, while he uttered the challenge, he certainly offered the dealer every chance in the world to get away with him. It looked as though all the gambler had to do was to raise his hand and fire.

The spectators expected something of the kind, for there was an immediate move to the one side and the other of those who were almost or quite in line.

Instead of that the gambler raised his wrist slightly, bringing the muzzle of his weapon to bear on Uncle Bedrock, and at once pulled the trigger.

No report followed, for the hammer fell upon a worthless cartridge, and before he could cock the pistol again Long Bill was on him.

At the appearance of the new champion Uncle Bedrock appeared to think that his concern in the matter was over. Quite leisurely he proceeded to pick up the little pile of checks that he had accumulated, and slip them in his pocket; when the thud of the falling hammer came to his ears he did not even wince.

"A purty fight she are," he said, as he saw the tall man reaching for the dealer. A monstrous purty fight, an' ef I warn't otherwise beggared, I think I'd take a hand in it. As she are, I guess I'll slide out tell ther fun are over, onless— Hold on, thar! No tricks on travelers, ef you please! Jest lay thar tell we see what's what."

Mike Willard had recovered his senses, and was drawing his revolver as he rose.

Uncle Bedrock intended that his order should be obeyed, and he took a very good method to make sure of it. Things were growing warm, anyway, and as he heard a pistol-shot, and some loud exclamations, he caught Mike around the waist, and rolled under the table with him, thus getting out of harm's way.

It was about time, since the bullies who supported the house, right or wrong, were at hand, and were ready to make a clean sweep of all opposing elements. Three or four of them ran at Long Bill, and if he had not had muscle and resource, they would have had him quieted down in no time, even if they had to kill him to do it.

Two or three times did Bill strike at the men that came surging between him and the gambler; and then, in the midst of the riot and noise, the lights went out.

"For a well conducted shebang, with gentlemanly proprietors and a genteel class of customers, I must say that the Gilded Claw has its peculiarities. Very pleasant it is, no doubt"—as a bullet whizzed past his cheek, and buried itself in the wall with a sharp spat—"but Lucky Lester, if you want to be true to your name I think you had better get out. You have no friends here; and I don't think you are actually yearning for a row. Extended William se' as to be doing his whole duty, but I'll take it on trust, and not wait for the lamps to be lighted to see with my own two eyes."

At the time it did seem to Lawrence that he was acting with a caution that was unusual; but, as a second bullet in his direction served to strengthen his resolution he waited no longer, but went at once.

As he had taken a good look at the place when he entered, and remembered exactly how the land lay, he had no trouble in making his way out in the dark, though he ran against several other men, who were going in the same direction.

Once on the street and he was done with the Gilded Claw, for the evening at least. He had not added to his capital by his visit, but he had acquired some experience, and went away laughing.

Before he had gone a dozen yards, he was joined by a man, who, like himself, had just left the saloon. As he looked up at him sharply he was surprised, and not particularly delighted to see that it was Uncle Bedrock himself, or his double. Which, it was not so easy to make out, even though the party addressed him without hesitation.

"Evening, pard! Hope I see you well and hearty. Ain't you the man I heard ov funder back ez Lucky Lester?"

"Not knowing I can't say, but that is a name that they sometimes call me, and it does as well as any other to go to dinner by. What is your own royal sweet will?"

"Guess I ain't made no mistake. I kinder owe yer one, though maybe you don't know it; an' I ain't throwin' ther away chance ter pay it. I heard yer war a-comin' hyer, an' I heard su'thin' else. Ef I ain't mistookin thar's a gentleman laid out ter take yer sculp; an' he ain't pertik'ler about doin' it ov a fair way, either. Ef the fu'st letters ov his name don't spell, General Gloom I'd jest like ter know what they do spell? Ez you hev laid out some bizzness ter transact with him, yer hed better regulate yer-self accordin'."

"Thanks, old man. From the looks of things you ought to know something about the fellow, and if you want to tell the truth when it will do just as well as the other thing, I guess your warning is worth remembering. But what is your little game down here, anyway?"

"Ef yer could see me wink I'd hold both eyes shut; but you kin jest 'magine it w'en I tell yer I'm lookin' fur a lost son, ez come to ther West in ther days ov his yewth. Otherwise, guess ther bizzness are perivate, an' peccoliar."

"All right. I ought to have known enough not to ask the question. The facts are on the surface, and it don't take a prophet to see what line you follow. But, wern't you getting a little beyond your depth when you rung into the game at the Gilded Claw? I looked for you to drop every moment until I saw you roll under the table. It don't do for a man of your looks to monkey around Mike Willard and his pard; though I must say that you handle yourself much better than the average, and if you had half a show would give a good account of yourself. They will be after you, now; and I'll give you a warning in return for yours. If you stay in the town you want to walk with your eyes open or you will soon be in a condition not to care whether they are shut or not. If Lem gets his irons in your direction he will pull trigger whether you are looking his way or the other. And if he pulls there will be a dead Rufus Primrose."

"Hey! Hillo! How did you—but—all right! I'll see yer later, an' mebbe ther ole tramp kin open yer eyes still funder. I hev me gaze jinn'rally p'inted whar it will do ther most good; an' jest now thar's torrads ther boss ov ther agents. Ef you sh'ud want ter look same ways, an' hev a pard fur doin' it that war w'uth hev'n, just call on ther onders'ined at his place ov bizzness, an' you'll find him allers at home—when he ain't somewhar else. So long!"

Uncle Bedrock slouched away with his usual careless gait, leaving Lawrence to reflect on the information he had received.

"Extensive William has it in for me too, if I am not away off; and it wouldn't take very much to make me believe that Gloom set him on the war-path; but he is hardly that unworthy individual himself. If it is a case of sudden growth, however, the man is a curiosity, and I want to cultivate him. If I see him again I think I'll ask him how it is. I'll have to charge him a fair percentage on possible winnings to make things even. Guess I could convince him what was his duty—if I carried a shot-gun. It will take some time to make a fortune, at this rate; but the night is spoiled, and I may as well strike for home and bed."

"I must say, you don't seem much like an ardent lover—or, has time and distance quenched the flame that used to burn so brightly? I think I have known the hour when you would not have thought of slumber until you were sure that there was no chance to see the object of your affections. Oh, these men! these men!"

He would not have been half so much surprised if some one had fired a pistol at his ear. The voice was the voice of Cleopatra DeLangdon; and at that moment there was no one further from his thoughts than that same handsome young lady. Unconsciously he had spoken aloud, and she was right at his shoulder to hear his words.

He wheeled at the sound.

"In the name of wonder what are you doing here? Hav' you quite taken leave of your senses to be on the streets of a place like Ginger Flat alone, and at this time of night? It is bad enough for a man, if he is a stranger."

"Look before y u speak, if you please. Who told you that I was alone? With your thoughts in the clouds, and your nose to the ground, you would not know if I had a regiment of soldiers

at my back. Perhaps, if you are half as brilliant as you are credited with being, you can observe my escort, if you look sharply in this direction."

He was looking sharply enough; but as for the escort to which she referred, he could see nothing of it until she held up her hands. At the flourish she gave, he understood. She held a short but serviceable revolver.

"You see, sir, that I also have added to my education since last we met."

"Education is a very fine thing; but experience is worth considerable more. Perhaps you and your friend would cut a great deal smaller figure than you think for, if you stumbled over some of the bad men of the Flat. They are death on good-looking boys, if they have anything of the tenderfoot about them. But that does not answer my question, what are you doing here? You can answer it as we go along; for I shall feel it my duty to turn your face in the direction of the Rising Sun, and get you safe within its borders as soon as possible."

"My dear sir, if you were half as acute as you used to be you would know that I am here to look for you. After what I said to-day, you must have known that I had much more in reserve, and would take the earliest occasion to have it out."

"After so many years a day more or less would make but little difference; and by daylight the streets of the town would not be so dangerous, if it was necessary for you to tread them alone."

"Excuse me. I thought that you knew my maternal ancestor better than all that. By daylight she will be on her guard, and I might find it impossible to slip away from the range of her keen vision. To-night she was tired and sleepy from the ride; and it may be that there was a little laudanum in the nightcap that I persuaded her to take. When I saw that she was safe for the night, or the best part of it, I donned my private uniform, and started in search of my lord and master, after having been assured that he was not in the hotel. I called at the Gilded Claw, but could obtain no information. Every one there was too much excited over a late disturbance, in which that tramp we picked up this afternoon, and to whom I think I saw you speaking but just now, played a prominent part. I stumbled upon you by chance; and now that I have found you I do not intend to let you go until we have come to some understanding."

"Oh, as it has turned out, I suppose it was all for the best; and I ought not to scold you too much; but, indeed, it was no slight risk for you to run, even in that disguise. I wish you would promise me that there will be no more such work until you get to a country where it is safer for man or woman to walk alone on a dark night. Now, I am at your service. I hardly suppose that you have come all the way to Ginger Flat to find me; and if you had you would not have brought the old lady with you, unless it was for war."

"You are right. You were furthest from my thoughts when I agreed to accompany her—or, at least, the idea of meeting you here. I will not deny that for years there has been a haunting dread that you would turn up when least desired, and perhaps work me more woe than ever."

"Don't say that. If there has been any woe it was not worked by me willfully. I agreed to a bit of folly proposed by our friends; and never dreamed that it had been a burden to you since until your words to-day opened my eyes a trifle. Yet, even now I scarcely understand. You know that you can count on me. What is it you want?"

"I want to know whether you consider me your wife; or, am I some one else's? Who am I? Who do I belong to?"

"I guess, to me," was the answer; but not by Lucky Lester.

A man enveloped in a cloak strode past them; and then, wheeling, suddenly, confronted the two.

CHAPTER XI.

MISS DELANGDON IS SEVERAL TIMES SURPRISED.

To Lucky Lester the voice was perfectly unfamiliar; but it was different with Cleopatra DeLangdon. She seemed to recognize it on the instant, and uttered a cry that was of both alarm and surprise. And the new-comer understood that he was recognized, for he continued:

"After that recognition it seems hardly worth while to attempt any explanation to the answer I have given to your question. You have almost admitted it was the truth. Whether I am here to claim my property is a different matter altogether. Perhaps I could say with more positiveness if I knew what you have come to this out-of-the-way place for. I have some rights, as you appear to be willing to allow; and to question you on the subject is one of them."

"I have admitted nothing," responded Cleopatra, striving to put a bold face on the matter, and show a courage she certainly did not feel. "I know not who you are, and deny your right to address me. If you do not withdraw I will throw myself upon the protection of this gentleman, in whom I have recognized an old acquaintance."

"Unfortunately, the gentleman has as much

curiosity as myself, and will be apt to act accordingly. After such a claim he will have no objection to standing by and getting both sides of the subject."

"You are mistaken, sir. Anything that I would care to hear would be told me by the lady. Set it down in your vocabulary that whatever she says is gospel, and govern yourself accordingly. Your further presence here will be an insult—to me."

"And will be resented accordingly? Ha, ha! I know you, Lucky Lester, otherwise Manton, Dunleigh; and, in spite of your reputation, do not care who you consider is being insulted. If you had not been curious you would have drawn on sight. But I have said about all I care to say to-night. I wanted to let you both know that I was alive and on the ground, and that I am in condition to claim my lawfully wedded wife. How soon I will urge that claim depends. I will see you both later. *Au revoir.*"

He waited for no response, but vanished as silently as he had come, though they could see him striding down the street at a rate that soon took him out of range of hearing.

"Why did you not shoot?" exclaimed Cleopatra, when she was sure that he was going. "I saw that your hand was on your revolver; and you had given him all the warning that he deserved."

"Because, though I have dropped my man on occasion, when life depended, I have never been an assassin. The fellow knows it, too. We may meet again—indeed, I am sure of it. In that case there will probably be trouble; but until he has declared his intentions how could I do aught else than I did? If he tells the truth, he has so far acted with peculiar moderation. And, from what you said this afternoon, I can almost believe him. I see now, more than ever, that you will have to go over the whole ground if, as I fancy, you want me to help you to be rid of him."

"I see," said Cleopatra, in a calmer tone. "All my troubles have been from my own foolishness; and the time has come when I must turn over a new leaf. I may as well be frank with you, especially as I know that I did not treat you altogether well in the times that are gone. But, first, let me ask: did you come to this place because you knew that I was to be here?"

"I am sorry to have to own that I did not. Years ago I thought of no one else. Of late years on the contrary, I have not thought of you at all. I would sooner have been shot and gone for than met you, and have all the misery of those years to go over once more. And it will be my luck—I have known that from the moment I recognized you in the stage."

"Don't you be so disconsolate. You are no longer a boy, and you ought not to have to learn the same lesson twice. Years ago I only laughed at you when you gave me a sample of that raving; now I can talk to you soberly, and I hope to your profit. The worst thing in all this world that you could have would be an unwilling wife. Try and forget your own interests a few moments, and look at mine."

"Be honest with me for once, and tell me the truth. There was one question over which I worried myself to the verge of insanity then, and it may vex me now. Was I simply crazy; or, did you encourage me? Had I not believed that you did, one life might have been the brighter; and perhaps two."

"Perhaps I did; if so, forgive me. I believe I never should have done so had it not been for my mother. We might have remained simple acquaintances forever but for the violent dislike that she took for you. She was unreasonable, and I was willful; and though I understood your meaning well enough, I deny that I ever gave any verbal assurance to you that you were or could be more to me than a simple friend."

"But your manner? Surely, though it may have been the height of presumption, yet if, I could believe my eyes, you said sometimes more than you now admit."

"Perhaps! Perhaps! I was younger, then; and as I have told you, foolish. When that ridiculous farce was proposed, of a mock marriage, I admit I took a pleasure that had something of the malicious in it, at standing up with you, and going through in jest the forms I knew you were so anxious to submit to in earnest. I knew how it would have horrified mother, and was vaguely wishing through the whole ceremony that she could step in to see it. It was only when the graceless scamp who officiated sent me a certificate the next day, with the assurance that the contract was perfectly binding on both of us, and that I had his heartfelt congratulations, that my eyes were partially opened to the reality of the whole affair. Then I saw you, and—well, I never felt quite so kindly toward you as I did after that interview. When you said it was the desire of your life to keep me, and yet, that you would give me up, that you would go away forever, if I but said the word, I believed you."

"And said the word," said Lawrence, bitterly.

"If we had both known all it was to cost me it would have been the same. My life was wrecked by the decision; and I doubt if yours has been made the better by it."

"Admit all that; under the circumstances

you would not have had me act differently. It was settled between us that we would never meet again, and that I was to have my liberty as completely as though we had never seemed to promise to love, honor, and the rest. In our youthful ignorance we thought that settled it. You kept your part of the pledge as well as you were able; and if we have met again the fault is mine. All this is an old story; it is what followed after this, at an interval of years, that you must know."

"Not if you do not care to tell it. If you wish to hold me to it, my pledge is still good. I have no right to call you to account for anything you may have done in my absence. When I gave you your liberty it was absolute."

"Not as absolute as we tried to think. A fact remains a fact, whatever else we may say it is. We were just as legally married as any two in the State of New York. As neither of us has ever obtained a divorce, so far as I know, we must be man and wife to this day."

"Be careful, Cleo. Do not say too much. I am only human, and I loved you very dearly. Do not fascinate me again. I might not prove so complacent a victim."

"Nonsense! We are talking facts now, and not sentiment. It is this second marriage that I want to speak of, and yet am almost ashamed to mention. In spite of what I have said, I have always loved my mother; and as the years went by without seeing or hearing of you I almost had forgotten that you ever existed by the time that Leo Dunning came on the carpet."

"Leo was a fine looking man and reputed to have riches without end. Every girl in our set, save myself, set her cap for him. Of course, under such circumstances he would naturally want me. I neither liked nor disliked him, so that he had a fair field; but I assure you that he would never have won had it not been for mother. And she would not have interfered, I think, had not ruin been staring her in the face. You know she always fancied that she had a knack for business and was dabbling in stocks, and kindred speculations."

"For a year she had been most unlucky, and had ventured deeper and deeper in the endeavor to retrieve her losses. The time came when she could carry sail no longer unless she had more money than there would have seemed any earthly way of obtaining had not this Dunning been in the vista. He was known to be from the West, and was reputed to be worth millions. He had at least thousands at his command, and was supposed to be owner of mines that were fabulous in their wealth-producing power. If he was looked upon with a little coldness by some of those whom he was anxious to propitiate it was because he was a new man and not because of any doubt as to his wealth, overestimated though it might be."

"I never asked how they came to an understanding, but he must have known of her investments, as they had been freely spoken of among her acquaintances. It was understood that to put more money in her margins was to run the greatest risk of throwing it away. And yet, if the favorable turn should come, of which at that moment the chances seemed so slender, there was no telling where the reaction would stop."

"Well, it was live or die; and mother came to me before Dunning ever spoke. Of course, she knew nothing of the marriage in the years before, and if she had it is not likely that she would have taken a more serious view than I did. There was some pretty plain talking on her side, and I gave in after a struggle."

"There were few preparations made, for mother could not wait; and he would only agree to advance her a check for fifty thousand on our wedding-day. That came soon enough to save her. She forwarded the check to be placed to her bank account, and at the same time sent the other checks to the parties who had already given her the grace of twenty-four hours on the strength of her promises, and their knowledge of what was to happen. It saved my mother—but, sir, that check was not worth the paper on which it was written, and the next day it was all over the world that Leo Dunning had cut a great dash on a comparatively small capital, had been wanted in the West, and had barely succeeded in making his escape from the officers of the law but a few hours after his marriage, and just as he was about to start on his wedding trip. He had contemplated the flight all along, but had expected to take me with him. Had it not been for a touch of feminine obstinacy I would have gone, too."

"But, fortunately, in the few hours that intervened, there had been a sudden rise in stocks, and a whilom friend helped my mother to carry the burden that a few days before he would not have dreamed of touching. He shared in her gains, and between them they made a pretty figure, so that my sacrifice was not altogether in vain; though I have suffered none the less. At regular periods I hear from the fugitive, who assures me that he has not forgotten, and that sooner or later he will be able to claim the wife whom he adores, while, to make certain that I have not been abandoned, he always forwards at the same time a liberal allowance. Not a cent of the money have I ever used, but the

whole amount, now nearly ten thousand dollars, is in bank, so that I can refund it at any time. If he keeps on I will be able to offer a fair ransom, and I have sworn that not a penny of it shall he ever again touch unless it is first certain that I am to be rid of him forever."

"But, good heavens! why have you never got a divorce? Under the circumstances there would not have been the least trouble in securing it."

"Not much—had it not been for the prior marriage. He knew of that, for he wrote me that it would be as well for me to consider that it would be better to begin at the beginning, or not at all; and that a complete divorce would have to be founded on an explanation of a certain other ceremony of which he had proof. He hinted that bigamy was a worse crime in the eyes of the world than being the wife of a man who had been unfortunate."

"You shall be rid of him at any cost," declared Lawrence, firmly. "In the opinion of many I may be but little if any the better of the two, and hardly the man to right your wrongs; but at least I am willing, and have been, to sacrifice everything to assure your happiness. Is there more that I should know? The opportunity for confidence may not come soon again."

"You have asked nothing in regard to what would naturally seem the strangest part of all. Why have we come here? Perhaps it is only a part with all the rest of mother's scheming, speculative life. Once more she has had losses, and now thinks to once again recoup herself. I am not sure that I understand what her mission really is, though she is here both to find a man, and to look for a treasure that is hidden, either in the ground or in the possession of an old-time friend of my father. Perhaps you know that he was a miner, and made the fortune that my mother has enjoyed, in that business. He died in the West, and left her all that he had. What she received was certainly enough to satisfy a person of moderate desires; but there was, it seems, something back, and it is for that we have come. How she expects to succeed in unearthing it, when the men who were on the spot at the time failed to trace it up, is more than I know, but no doubt she has her plans. Perhaps, if you could see a way to help her, it would bring us nearer together, and give an opportunity for the further conversation that we must have. To-night there is time to say but little more."

"You might come to a worse person," responded Lawrence, a little coldly. "To be of actual service, however, I would have to know the name of the mine, or mines, your father was interested in, and the name, too, under which he worked them. I thought I knew something about the past history of the Flat, even if I am a stranger here for the present; but I remember no such person as a DeLangdon. If I had heard the name mentioned, you can be sure that it would have attracted my attention. Your father's first name was—what?"

"Horace DeLangdon; and he did not leave the East as a compulsory exile, either. You may be sure that he was neither ashamed nor afraid to be known by his own and only name."

"Don't be indignant at the question, or so positive in your answer. Sometimes, if a man does not change his name here of his own accord, it is changed for him. An unfortunate peculiarity, a cast of the eye, a hitch in the gait, will give him a name that he must answer to or not be known at all. And the mine in which your mother is interested—have you heard it mentioned?"

"Yes, sir, I have, though something in your manner tells me that it might be as well to trust you no further. It was known as the Swallow Tail in his day."

"Yes," said Lester, still more slowly. "Now you are really getting near to bedrock. I have heard of such a mine—or, one worked by a man the boys called Swallow Tail, which amounts to the same thing. I may be able to give you more information than I thought, after I have looked the thing up a little. But, you should have something more definite to give me. I must know what your mother claims, and by what right. Until then I am all at sea. It would be a little strange if it should turn out that Swallow Tail—as they called him, I believe, from the cut of his coat—was your father."

"And you knew him!" exclaimed Cleopatra, with sudden vehemence, and clasping both hands on Lucky Lester's arm. "Can you tell me more of him; how he lived and how and when he died? Do you know, for years I have been haunted by questions such as those, until life has been almost a burden. And mother would say so little."

"Humph!" answered Lawrence, after an absent fashion, "I am not sure that he is dead at all."

CHAPTER XII.

ISAAC, THE DWARF.

"WHAT do you mean?"

The question was the first that came to Cleopatra's tongue, though it was not the wisest one in the world, literally considered. There was

not a bit of doubt in her mind but that Lucky Lawrence meant just what he said, though he spoke aloud without knowing it.

The amazement of the young lady recalled him to himself, and he realized that he had allowed more to escape him than he had intended. With any one else he might have tried to repair the error by some sort of an explanation, but with this woman, whom he had once loved from the bottom of his soul, he could not do that. She had been frank with him, and he intended to be fair with her.

"I have said altogether too much, considering how little I really know. Viewed in a sober light it hardly seems possible that the man to whom I have referred can have been Horace DeLangdon. Nor have I any evidence that he is not dead. But, so far as I know he did not die; he disappeared. In such cases every man is allowed his own suppositions, and I may have mine. As you have just said, it is late for further conversation, and I am beginning to be anxious on your account. Perhaps it would be better for us to close this interview. When we meet again I may be able to explain better to you what you want to know about the past, and have some suggestions for the present. If things are as I half suspect, you have more than General Gloom and that renegade husband of yours to watch."

The two had much at the end of their tongues to say, much that perhaps had little to do with the hidden treasure, and the affairs of Mrs. DeLangdon; but, neither was exactly ready to speak. And though they did not mention Leo Dunning, each remembered that he was possibly lurking somewhere near, and there was no telling what he might do if tempted too long. They looked around to see whether they had wandered toward the Rising Sun.

On the contrary, they were beyond the limits of the town, and everything around them seemed strangely silent.

"We must make our way back at once," said Cleo, with something like a shiver, as she noted where their steps had carried them. "I would not trust myself where that man could make a stroke without being seen. My opinion of him in the past was bad enough; now that I have seen the country where he hailed from I understand him even better, and would expect murder if no worse. Let us hurry."

"A moment," answered Lester, peering into the darkness to the right, his hand upon his revolver. "There is something over there, and if it is that Number Two of yours I want to give him a chance to show his hand. He would not be biding there for any good, and the sooner he develops his intentions the better. I would as soon take chances now as later on."

They did not have long to wait. A figure hobbled out into something like a plain view, though, as it came, it was hard to say whether it was of man or beast. At first glance it looked like the latter, and it was only when they could distinctly see the outlines of a broad sombrero that they were satisfied that beneath it was the form of a man or a boy.

"And who are you?" asked Lester, not a moment off his guard, though he could see that this was not the man who had lately parted from them. "You run a heap sight of risk when you lurk around here in the bushes. The most of the men who live in Ginger Flat, if they had seen you under such circumstances, would have shot to see you jump. Give an account of yourself, and don't be slow about doing it."

"If you knew who I am you might be glad enough to see me, and little would you say about shooting. But, the time is not yet up, and I may not speak. Five years! Ho ho! Five years is a long time; and so, ho! ho! is five days. Who knows what may happen? Then it may be mine, all mine! There are some that look for hidden gold, and find sudden death. Ho, ho!"

The two were surprised alike at the apparition before them, and his strange words. That they had some connection with the matter of which they had just been speaking was not for a moment to be doubted; but, who was the creature, and how did he know anything about the hidden treasure for which Mrs. DeLangdon was supposed to be searching?

In looks he was an oddity. Not four feet in height, his frame was that of a full-grown man, and his voice was a deep base that could not have come from the chest of any one not mature in years. There was not a chance to see the outlines of his face, since it was covered with a long, full, flowing beard, over which a pair of glittering eyes flashed in the darkness.

He stood in front of them with his arms akimbo; and when that sepulchral laugh rolled out of his mouth, a mouth that the hearers could well imagine was cavernous in extent, Cleopatra shrunk back with more dread than she had felt when her second husband appeared on the carpet. She caught at Lawrence's arm, and clutched it tightly.

"Take him away!" exclaimed the young lady, with a shiver. "The monster is here to do mischief. See! He has a knife in his hand. Look out! He will be on you!"

"Do not be alarmed," answered her companion, who, now that the first shock was over, was gazing curiously at the strange being. "It

is Isaac, the dwarf. I have heard of him, but this is the first time we ever met. I must say, I thought he was dead. Hello, Isaac! Where have you kept yourself in hiding all these years? If I had remembered you at first I would not have talked quite so roughly, but, all the same, give an account of yourself."

"Ho, ho! An account of myself? Isaac is a man of whom no account can be given. He comes and he goes, and there is no one the wiser for it. But, all the time, he keeps the secrets to himself, and waits. It would be a grand thing to have a hundred thousand dollars' worth of bright, yellow nuggets. How they glisten and glow! What heaps of things they would buy! What a grand fellow Isaac would be if he had them in his hands for his very own! Perhaps they will be his. Who knows? You have come to find them; but without Isaac they are lost to you forever. And the woman with the wrinkled face, and this one with the fair—oh, they would both like to find the treasure of the old man who camped in the hills; but they must have Isaac to show them. And how do they know but that Isaac will kill them for the sake of the gold that should all be his? Was he not robbed of it twice over? Oh, oh! The time is coming when Isaac can have his own again and gain all the revenge that he wants. He has sharpened his knife, and will stand between the treasure and every thief. If you are afraid of him it is because your heart is not in the right place, and if it is not, Isaac will know it. Go back, or be ready to die the death that comes to all fools and knaves who search for the hidden treasures of the hills. Ho, ho! He has warned them; why do they not flee?"

"What does he mean?" asked Cleo, as the dwarf closed with another of his hollow laughs. "How does he know anything about my mother and me? He is worse than a mad wolf."

"I'll take Isaac in mine, in preference," answered Lawrence lightly, but watching the dwarf, keenly. "It is a little hard to tell what he does mean; or, whether he means anything at all, except that he can give you points if he chooses. As he is seldom seen, and is hard to find when he does not make one of his sensational appearances, now that we have him we had better make the most of him. It makes little difference how he comes to know anything about you and your mother—the important thing is to learn what he knows about the treasure. Keep cool, and listen. If he talks long enough he will be sure to say something worth the hearing."

All this in a low tone, that could not be expected to reach beyond the ears that were so close to his lips that his drooping mustache almost touched the hearer.

"Whisper to her if you choose, but a little bird of the air will carry your words to Isaac. He does not have to listen to know. You would find out about the treasure? Ho, ho! The time is not up yet; and until then no man can find it. But, there are wicked men who are seeking it, and they would stand in your road if they knew how; and gather it in if they could find it. Look after them, but let the treasure alone. When the hour is at hand search and you may find. Until then it belongs to none of you, but only to Isaac. For nearly five years he has had it, and he does not like to give it up. Honest Ike they used to call him, ho, ho! When the weeping widow goes away we will see what she calls him. He will be near to hear, and to see how she goes. It may be in tears, and it may be in laughter; but, somebody will have a heavy heart if it beats at all."

"All right, Isaac. I guess it is not mine that you are talking about, for you generally speak by card. I expect to take a hand in seeing the ladies over the raffle. You must remember that I don't know anything about this five year business. I promised that I would show the ladies the road to the camp in the hills. After that I can let them hustle for themselves so far as any duty to the dead or the living may go; though I did have an idea that I would take a hand in myself if they did not come to time. If you are going to stay by them perhaps I might as well draw out at first as at last. You could run things a heap sight better. What do you say, old man? Will you act on the square if I jump the game? If you ever heard anything about me you must know that you can trust me; and I will stay where you want me if you will promise to do your level best on their account."

"All that is nothing, nothing. Stay with them or not, as you may care. It will be all the same to Isaac, and he will do just the same. He comes and he goes, but he is honest Isaac all the while. He may be on the side of the woman with the wrinkled face, if she will but mind his warning; but he loves the fair-faced one the better. Let her promise that she will not go beyond what the dead man has said, and it may be the better for her. When the wicked men look for her he will darken their eyes; and if they find her, who can carry her safely through the danger like to honest old Ike? Ho, ho! Go back, and tell her that if she searches now it will be the worse for her. Hark! There is someone coming, and he is no friend to the dwarf who lives on the mountain. If blood is to run, better that it be not before those eyes. Good-night,

fair maiden. Isaac has seen thee and heard thee, and will not forget."

He gave a great bound as he ceased speaking, and before Lester could attempt to arrest his departure he was out of sight, in the covert from which he had but lately issued.

"There is no use to follow him," said Lester, who did not appear annoyed. "A dozen men couldn't run him down in a year. Let him go, and we will make our way back to the Rising Sun. By this time you must begin to think that there is something of a mystery about the affairs of your late father; and if so, I guess you are not mistaken. I wish I could tell you all; but just now you have heard more than was perhaps advisable. I think I will have to interview your mother to-morrow, and see what she knows and intends. I can tell you, Isaac will try to be as good as his word, and unless I was afraid that some of these outsiders would get away with all the luggage, I would think twice before I made a move until the five years he speaks of are up. The pity is that I do not know precisely when they are. Your mother may, and one or the other of us should find out. We can talk as we go along, but the woods seem to be full of eavesdroppers to-night, and I would advise you to be careful of what you say."

"I almost think I have said too much already; and just now I feel more like thinking. I do not know what to believe, but have some strange suspicions. Walk faster! I have wandered too long, and too far. Suppose something has happened to my mother!"

She had never let go of her companion's arm, which she had grasped when the dwarf appeared. Now she hurried him along at a great rate, and was as anxious to reach the Rising Sun as she had been, an hour or two before, to get away from it.

After all, she loved her mother.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE VISITORS FOR MRS. DELANGDON BEGIN TO ARRIVE.

It will readily be believed that Mrs. DeLangdon slept soundly that night when the hint of Cleopatra concerning the laudanum is remembered. She did not hear her daughter enter, which was fortunate for her peace of mind. The sight of the seeming boy might have upset her nerves; and the revelation when the masculine habiliments were doffed would not have been particularly soothing. When Cleo came sweeping into the room she had forgotten all about them, and threw herself down in a seat to think over the strange events of the evening.

It is true, she turned toward her mother and listened for a moment; but the regular breathing she heard assured her, and she allowed her thoughts to wander at will.

They had ground enough over which to travel.

The presence in the neighborhood of the two men she had married—neither of whom could be called a husband—the quest that had brought her mother thither; Isaac the dwarf, with his strange warnings; all were mixed and blended, until she became utterly confused as to her objects and opinions, and retired to rest in despair. After that she was asleep soon enough, and knew nothing more until it was broad daylight, and her mother, with a hand on her shoulder, was calling on her to rise.

"Come, Cleo, make haste! There is much to do to-day, and I judge that the rest of the people in the house had their breakfast an hour ago. Remember that we are strangers here. No one knows us, and we know no one. It will take so much the longer to find out which way to turn, and indeed, if I fail in finding the one individual to whom I bring a letter from my lawyers, I scarcely know what course to take."

"And who is that party? You have kept very quiet about your aims and plans. It would have at least been prudent to have enlightened me a little in regard to them, so that in case anything happened that you could not continue active work I could take up the matter for you."

While Cleopatra spoke she was rapidly making her toilet, so that there was no time lost in the conversation. Her face was unconsciousness itself, and her mother never suspected that perhaps the young lady knew almost as much as herself about the treasure of the hills. She answered a little impatiently:

"Trust me to attend to all that. Your presence here with me is a necessity, and when the hour comes I will explain all. Nothing will happen to me, unless it may be disappointment. I hope I will be able to say as much for you. The man of whom I speak is one who no doubt knew your father well, and was, I suspect, intrusted by him with some interests that were great in promise, but had not as yet been productive of anything else. He must have been an honest man or such trust would not have been reposed in him; and no doubt there has been some provision made for his possible death. Looking for him here is largely guess-work, but taking into account all the changes of the years that have passed this is the most likely place to find him."

"Very well. Keep your secrets if you want to, and—" (*sotto voce*)—"I will keep mine. I

am ready for breakfast, which is saying a good deal when one considers what it will probably be like."

Together the two sought the dining-room, and found the *cuisine* not nearly so bad as they had anticipated. Mr. Jerkes was evidently aware of the fact, and hovered near in the hope of receiving due congratulations. His face brightened when they came. After that he was in fine frame to answer any questions that his guests might ask.

"You have been here some time, have you not?" said Mrs. DeLangdon, with the gracious air she knew so well how to assume.

"About ez long ez ther town, madame, about ez long ez ther town," he responded, briskly. "Hed a eatin'-house when thar warn't more ner two men an' a stray mule went along ther trail in a week—an' thar war a heap sight more profit in ther mule than ther men. Ther bizzness grewed up with ther place, tell ther Risin' Sun come out ov ther profits, slick an' clean. Sence then it's money hand over fist; an' ef it keeps along this hyer way a year or two more, I kin aford ter retire."

"Ah! Quite gratifying, that. Have others been so fortunate?"

"Fur them ez follered a solid bizzness, it's bin about ther same way. Ginger Flat are a place whar thar bez bin more good luck fur a honest man than ary camp I ever heard ov. Thar war Obe Jones—we allers call him 'deacon' amongst ourselves. Hed a leetle shanty over on ther other side ov ther crick, seven year ago. He didn't go much on minin', but hed a leetle stock ov tobacker an' bacon, an' sich like necessaries, thet he sold between times when thar war a call. Look at him now! He's a-rollin' in riches, so ter speak, an' got a store sich ez they don't offen see away back East."

"Ah! Thanks for mentioning it. I shall have occasion to visit his emporium in the course of the day. I have some purchases to make, and always prefer dealing at the largest establishment in the town. You speak of his being here seven years ago. Is that the furthest back that the history of the camp and its mines can be traced?"

"Jest about, fur regular work. In course, thar hed bin perspectors on ther ground afore that; but thar war no rush; an' no one knows ef they struck it rich er not. Thar war old Swaller Tail, ez did a heap ov perspectin' some-whars about this region, but it ain't so sure ef he made it pay, er whar he actooally war. Every ole hole in ther ground ez they find they credit him with, but it don't stan' ter reason ez he would be a-tinkerin' 'round hyer fur nothin', when he hed big interest funder back. He war a queer one; but he warn't exactly a blamed ijeot."

"Thanks. When I am ready to go out, I will ask you for further directions; though I suppose almost any one could direct me to the store of Mr. Jones."

"Any one, without any exception; but ef yer feels strange in a strange place, I kin send a boy along."

"Not necessary, sir, I assure you. Many thanks, but I can find the way myself."

"By ther way, thar war a tough-lookin' citizen—leastwise, he war more ov a stranger, ez he only struck ther town yesterday, along with yerself—thet war hyer inquiren' fur you afore you war up. Sez he bez important bizzness with yer. Mebbe he bez, and mebbe otherwise; but I'd advise yer ter deal keerful with him. He may know a heap, an' be bad medicine all ther same."

"For your warning I am again your debtor. Who was the man, and what did he pretend to want; or did he not leave any account of himself?"

"Hard ter say. He talked over about three deestricks ov ground, an' then went away 'thout gettin' it clear what he wanted. Ef he calls ag'in shell I let yer know?"

"It might be best, though I cannot imagine who it can be."

"Ov con-se not. I reckon he's a fraud, but he kin talk ez slick ez a whissel. I kin send him into ther parlor ef you wants ter hear him, but I'll be near, an' ef yer give ther word I'll fire him out afore he kin know what's comin'. Reckon I hear him in ther office now."

"Let me see him at once, if he is there. I expected to meet several parties here on business, though I have not the least idea what they will look like. This may be one of them."

The ladies adjourned to the "parlor," and very shortly thereafter Mr. Jerkes brought in their visitor.

It was none other than the original Uncle Bed-rock.

He had made some little change in his toilet, but without changing his generally disreputable appearance. The cheap paper collar set off his neck to a decided disadvantage, and a course of blackening had not improved the appearance of his boots. He advanced with a flourish.

"Bz a feller traveler only it mou't hev bin my dooty ter inquire how you an' yer lovely daughter—*pulchrior filia*, ez Horace bez it—hed stood ther trials an' sich like ov what may be called ther path ter ther palace. The Risin' Sun an' no doubt ther achemay ov boardin' houses, an'

Timothy knows how ter run a hotel. Fur me-self, me means don't allow ov ther 'stravagans' ov ther instertootion; but I am a stoppin' at Mike O'Hoolahaus—be the same token he's a Oirishman.

"But, all ov w'ich are entirely incidental, an' ter interdoose ther object ov me visit; I onderstand that you hev bin visitin' this hyer region fur ther purpose ov findin' sart'in' lost treasures, s'posed ter hev bin dug outen ther rocks ov ther hills by a priur settler. Ef you kin convince me ov ther worthiness of yer search, an' ther honesty ov yer intensions, I might be indooed ter assist at ther search; an' w'en I'm assistin' it goes a heap good ways. I'm ole Uncle Bedrock; an' I know this hyer region ov yore. Likewise a sart'in' gent, w'ich found much wealth, an' berried it fur his grateful heirs ter find w'en he war dead an' gone. Ov course, I expect a jew an' sufficient remunerashun; but, that won't be a bite fur a flea outen w'ot you'll git when I guides you ter ther spot whar ther ore lieth in ther glitterin' heap. W'ot say yer? Are it a largin'?"

Bedrock rattled off his speech at a great rate; but after he had once announced his platform he would have been allowed to finish if he had said twice as much. Mrs. DeLangdon was struck dumb with surprise. How this man could know of her object was a mystery, unless he was other than he seemed; and if he was, why he should have come in such a garb was a mystery. She eyed him sharply as he closed, but, stare at him as she might, she could see no signs that he was not genuine clear through. He was not the sort of man she would care to have anything to do with; yet she hesitated to give him the emphatic cold shoulder that her daughter expected her to show.

"I do not know, sir," she began, looking him over with the care of one uncertain whether it is a diamond in the rough or a lump of salt that is under hand. "You seem to have a proposition of some kind to make, but you have been so indefinite that I can not comprehend your meaning. Perhaps it is metaphorical. I am undoubtedly here on a quest; but you hardly look like the man to aid me. What is it that you are trying to propose?"

"Didn't you git a letter shortly afore yer left ther gilded lan of luxury in ther East? An' didn't that letter say yer war ter look inter ther affairs ov ther dear departed on't more, an' see ef yer couldn't find that thar war a heap big pile comin to yer? An' didn't it suggest this hyer identickie spot ez a good one fur a send-off; an' didn't it told yer ter put yer trust in ther man w'ot come to yer bearin' ther sign?"

"Something of the kind, I admit; but, how you knew, or know, of it is beyond my comprehension."

"Simple ez rat-catchin'. Yer humble sarvint war ther man ez sent ther letter. Then, when he knowed that yer war on ther way, he started out in fine shape fur ther flat. True, me expect are not w'ot mon't be expected, but you kin pin yer faith ter old Uncle Bedrock an' yer won't be disappointed, nary time."

"Ah, now I know that you are a fraud," answered Mrs. DeLangdon, decidedly. "Whoever the letter to which you allude may have come from, it was not from you. I was well acquainted with the writer of that letter, or I never would have thought of taking this journey. The handwriting was as familiar to me as my own. It is not worth your while to say more. You can consider the interview as closed, and take your departure at once, before I call upon Mr. Jerkes to eject you."

"Jest ez you have it, madame, jest ez you have it. It war on'y dooty to ther dear departed, ez I hev affectionately allooded to him aforetime, ez indooed me ter give yer a chance fur ontold gold. It war I who sent ther letter, all ther same, though I am not aware ov hev'in' said w'o writ it. Perhaps it war a pard, ez left it with his buzzom frien', in ther days afore he become ther wreck ov misfortune, an' ther sport ov fate. An' perhaps he didn't say ez after a reasonable time I could look ther matter up ez a residuary legatee. Dooty ter a ole-time pard hev' carried me this fur; jestice ter meself, w'ich are down ter bed-rock an' in urgent necessity of a gin'ral brace-up, will now require me ter look out fur number one. I am wishin' yer a very good-day."

Very profound was the bow which the fellow executed, and his foot was already raised to take a step in the direction of the door when he became aware that in its frame stood the counterpart of himself—the other Uncle Bedrock, who had dawned upon him the previous day, shortly after he had seated himself in comfort on the stage.

CHAPTER XIV.

LUCKY LESTER RUNS THE RISK.

"Excuse me, madame, but hev I ther felicity ov addressin'—Hello! I war onawares that I war introodin' on a private intervoo; but hev'in' bizness of extreme importans', I took ther liberty ov enterin' 'thout knockin'. Ef it would be more congenial, I kin call ag'in."

The second tramp was even more polite than the first, but he advanced into the room as he

spoke, and carefully closed the door behind him.

"What next?" exclaimed Cleopatra, more amused than angry, as she noted the perplexed look upon her mother's face.

"These two gentlemen look enough alike to be relatives, but I cannot see that we are called upon to endure their presence. Allow me to suggest, gentlemen, that we have not yet received our remittances, and the road-agents robbed us of every cent we had, on the way hither. Why, then, trouble yourselves about us? We could not be charitable if we wished. Call again when we have more time, and a little money, and perhaps you will find it worth your while. Mother is the most charitable woman in the world when she gets hold of a proper object, but at present, I assure you, your efforts are useless, and if you bother us, there will be trouble for you both."

"Not knowin' what this onmittergated fraud hez bin a-sayin', I can't understand ef yer words do him full justice or not, but I reckon you can't go fur wrong. He's ther biggest dead-beat thet ever drew breath. But with me, ther only great an' 'rigernal Bedrock, ther case are different. I onderstand that you are on ther find fur a big treasure, an' I hev heard things you ought ter know. I kin ter warn yer ter keep a bright lookout er yer will be in a heap sight danger. Ez I hev ther p'int's a'ready, an' yer needs a competent man ter take keer ov yer eenterests, I w'od announce thet I ar' him, an' no discount, fur cash. Ef change are ska'ss, w'y money are no object. Jest throw in board an' washin' an' yer onkle are satisfied."

"Good heavens! It is the same story. How many more are to come yet, to go over the rig-may-role about the dead partner, and his mythical treasure! Such honest generosity is too overwhelming to believe in."

"Ef you considers I'm offerin' me valloo'ble services, free, gratis, fur nothin', yer orter onderstand whar Bedrock stands. Ef you kin git this tramp ter go out hisself, er give me ther word ter help him, I kin give fuller perticklers."

"You will both go out," said Cleopatra, firmly. "I have heard enough. Whether you are in earnest or not, I do not intend to be mixed up with two such disreputable-looking objects."

"Wait, Cleopatra, wait!" interposed Mrs. DeLangdon. "This coincidence is, to say the least, remarkable; and I want to understand it better before I am too positive in my dismissal. By some means they have heard of my mission here; and though they may not know as much as they pretend, yet one or the other of them might be able to render valuable service. I must move carefully, and not throw away a chance. The matter is really something that you know nothing at all about. If you cannot endure their presence, I shall call in the landlord, and permit you to retire."

"Oh, if you desire to catechise them, go on. Their looks are enough to convince any one in a proper frame of mind that they are simply trying to play upon your credulity. If you are the sufferer don't blame me after this warning. Allow them to proceed. But if I had a choice I would prefer to deal with the first man on the carpet. He looks a trifle less like an impostor. Go on."

The original Bedrock had been listening with an air of one whose astonishment was so overwhelming that he could say nothing for himself. At the dubious compliment he turned toward Cleopatra, with a bow that was courtly in the extreme, while he held out one pudgy paw.

"Ef I war ez I on't war I w'oud say, put ther thar, pard. But, bein' a broken, an' so ter spe'k down-at-ther-beel specerment ov decayed gentility, I shell simply return thanks fur ther confidens' reposed in ther undersigned, an' ashoor you thet you can't go wrong when you trust ter me honor an' 'speruuns. This hyer man are not altogether unbeknowns to me, sence he hez already hed ther audacity ter attempt ter steal both me name an' wardrobe; more properly speakin' ther last comes first. Thar will be a settlement betwixt him an' me; but in ther presence ov ther gentler sex are not ther place ter call him ter account. Ef you will on'y send him adrift an' grant me a intervoo I kun convince yer thet I are infloenced by no onworthy motives. It are ther last appeal."

"Last appeal, nothin'. You kun bet he ain't ther sort ter give it up w'ile thar are a hope remainin'. It's me thet yer wants ter lis'en to; an' ther sooner yer do it ther sooner you will know s'uthin' ov int'rest."

The men spoke as though they were in earnest; in fact, they were getting excited. If Mrs. DeLangdon had met either without having seen the other there is no doubt but that she would have been willing to listen to what he had to say. But, it seemed hardly possible that they were both originals; and the trouble was to decide which was the impostor. It would not do to keep them there bickering over the question, yet which was she to listen to? Woman of resource as she considered herself to be, she felt at her wits' end to decide. She might not have come to any conclusion at all, save to let them fight it out, and listen to the man who won, had she not been assisted out of the dilemma by

the appearance of a third party, who having rapped quietly at her door without attracting any attention, took upon himself the liberty of entering. Looking up as he crossed the threshold she saw that the young man who had been with them the previous afternoon, in the coach, was before her.

He looked from one tramp to the other, as though he was amazed at the presence there of two such hard-looking cases. Then his amazement swelled into indignation.

"If you please, gentlemen, outside! Only time of asking. Git!"

"Fur ther present—you bet," said Bedrock of the first part. "So long, madame. You kin trust this hyer young man—ez fur ez he goes. After that, call on ther undersigned."

"He goes like a leetle iamb," said the other Bedrock, with an unctuous laugh.

"Guess I kin afford ter foller suit. An' ef you sh'd need a frien' at any time, call upon yours truly. This young rooster kin hold over me with his guns; but fur unalt'able devoshun ter ther fair sects thar are no one sooperior ov yer Onkle Bedrock. Ta, ta! I'm gone."

While the two were making their parting speeches Cleo was holding a short conference with Lucky Lester. As there was a strong chance that the ears of the elder lady might be open to any outside expressions, even if her eyes were fixed on the tramps, the conversation was carried on by signs; and Cleo was upbraiding him for his presence there, and peremptorily ordering him to say as little, and cut his stay as short as possible. To her mind she was almost sure that there was no place for him to appear, and that her mother would certainly recognize him.

Why she so dreaded that recognition was not altogether clear in her own mind. Perhaps it was because she wished to carry on an independent search with this young man as her assistant, and did not care that her mother should know that he was acquainted with the object of her visit there, or could supply any information in regard to the same.

Lawrence smiled and nodded, but made no motion to withdraw; nor did he offer any explanation as to the purpose that had brought him thither. He only indicated that he was desirous of another interview at the earliest practicable moment, and assured her that there was no danger that Mrs. DeLangdon would recognize him. If he had successfully passed inspection during the journey in the stage it was not likely that she would become suspicious now, especially when he once informed her of the object he had in view in seeking her out.

CHAPTER XV.

LAWRENCE SHOWS HIS KNOWLEDGE, AND MRS. DELANGDON CHANGES HER OPINION.

THE closing of the door behind the tramp was the signal for the elder lady to turn toward her latest visitor. She had an idea that he had come to interview her in regard to the ransom that he had arranged for with General Gloom; and, as she had a haunting suspicion that he was a confederate of the doughty chief, she did not feel like overwhelming him with thanks for the service he had apparently rendered her.

"You have my thanks for ridding me of those pests, and if you have any special object in visiting me I shall consider myself as in duty bound to listen to you. At the same time, I may as well tell you that I have very little confidence in the human race at large, and none at all in strangers."

"Correct, madame. That is as it should be if you want to get along in this world without a victim. I have no intention of asking you to put confidence in me or my statements. I am not sure but what it would be decidedly to my advantage if you did not."

"At the same time I have a duty to perform—one that may be to the dead as well as to the living."

"Precisely the way the tramps opened," remarked Cleo, to her mother, in an audible aside, of which Lester took no notice.

"I am not by any means sure that you are the person to whom the information I have should be imparted, but your arrival so exactly coincides with the time indicated in my instructions that it seems I make no mistake if I speak to you about the Swallow Tail developments, as well as the man who made them. Have you ever heard of a so-named mine?"

There appeared to be a talisman about the name. Mrs. DeLangdon dropped her suspicious look at once, and showed her interest.

"This is certainly very singular. Until a very short time ago I had never heard of the name; and it appeared to be only by chance that I ever came upon the trace of what I admit I am now deeply interested in. What do you know about the mine, or of the man who located it? I tell you beforehand that any information with which you may supply me will be thoroughly tested before it will be believed. But, on the other hand if you should be able to place me upon the track of that and those for which and whom I am searching, I promise you that in the end you shall be amply rewarded."

"Reward is no object," interposed Lawrence. "It is real pleasure for me to serve a lady at any time. The only thing that troubles me is that I will have to be very sure that you are the right person. A hundred thousand dollars is a big pile of money, and it will not do to throw it into the wrong hands. And, the worst of it is that I do not know the real name of the individual I am expecting. It is just possible that the person who is to come will be in like manner in the dark as to my name, and that of the person who left the trust in my hands. It is a very much mixed affair, you see; and where there is so much responsibility, with so little profit, you must pardon me if I go slowly."

"I think I understand your position, and respect you for it. As you doubtless have already heard something in regard to my mission in the West, you can understand me if I speak briefly. My husband came to the mining regions many years ago. He had his peculiarities, which accounts for the singular way in which he arranged his affairs."

"He died long enough ago to have been almost forgotten, and he left me all that he possessed. As it then seemed, I had no trouble in finding his effects. By good luck an honest firm had them in charge; and until a short time ago I believed that every cent he had at his death had been accounted for. Not long ago I received a letter from some anonymous hand, though written by Horace, telling me circumstantially that he had made certain discoveries during the latter part of his life, and that there was a fortune to be had that was well worth the looking after, but so arranged that it would be almost impossible to secure it, unless I gave it my personal attention. It stated that his discoveries might be traced by inquiring at this place for particulars of the Swallow Tail Mine, and mentioned one Obediah Jones as the man who would be the most likely to be able to furnish information. I have not yet seen Mr. Jones, but expect to look him up in the course of the day."

"And the name of your husband was—?" said Lester, without paying any attention to the statement in regard to Mr. Jones.

"His name was Horace DeLangdon."

"And you do not know that he was known by any other in this region?"

"He may have had another name; but, if so, I can see no reason for it, unless out of consideration for his family."

"Perhaps you could give me a description of your husband?"

"It would be easy enough to describe him as he was before he came to this country; but, as he was here for so many years, never revisiting what, you must excuse me if I call, civilization, I might be wide of the mark. From what you say, I should judge that you were personally acquainted with a man you suspect was my husband, and that you knew him under another name."

"Correct, madame. The party I have in my mind was known about here only as 'Old Swallow Tail.' Whether he had any other name was a question that never bothered us in those days. Excuse me for saying it, but he didn't appear to be of any particular account, and no one was bothering a particle whether he had any better handle. I stumbled across him in the course of my prospecting through this region when things were a good deal less developed than they are now. We happened to be companions for some days, and I found him a good deal better than his reputation. Finally, he confided to me that he was liable to disappear at any moment, and that he had been meeting with a success that he did not care to have known for some years. He believed that his claim was worked out, but there was a person in existence who would perhaps come looking for it some time in the future, and to that person it might be worth a hundred thousand to be able to find it. Then, after a pledge of secrecy, he showed me where he had been mining, and allowed me time to investigate the surrounding ground most thoroughly. I found nothing to indicate anything worth the working, and when I was about to leave him he asked me to promise that when the proper person came I would show the way to his mine. That person would be around about this time; and if not I might amuse myself trying to find out what the place was worth, though he suspected it would be, for me, a waste of time and labor."

"There you have it in a nutshell. If you have no more definite information than that which you have mentioned, it is more than likely that you will make nothing out of an abandoned shaft that has, more than once, been prospected by keen miners, who understood their business. Yet, from what he said, I am almost confident he intended to leave directions for finding what I then suspected to be a hidden treasure."

"And how comes it that you have not already investigated on your own account? Such caches are supposed to be fair preserves for the poaching of any one who may find them."

"A very neat question, since I am supposed to be only indifferently honest. But, the fact is, Old Swallow Tail saved my life, and, adding to that fact the promise which I made him, I have never been tempted to bother with the thing un-

til now. If the proper owner does not come I am the residuary legatee, and as such my conscience would tell me that I would be foolish if I did not make an effort to find what I have good reason to believe is a hidden fortune. What say you? Are you in search of this mine; and, if so, do you want me as an ally?"

"Most decidedly, yes. There is much yet to be explained, but there will be plenty of time for that, and for the present I am more anxious to have information as to where this mine really is, so that I can find it beyond peradventure. Knowing the character of my husband as well as I do, I am not at all astonished that he should have dealt in mysteries, even among his friends. I shall simply ask, will you guide me to the spot?"

"That is all right. If you are what you represent yourself to be I cannot go wrong in doing so; and if you are not, I do not think you can get any advantage out of the operation. When do you propose to begin your search?"

Considering what he had said in the outset, Lawrence appeared to have been very easily satisfied as to the identity of the lady, but Mrs. DeLangdon took no notice of the fact in the interest that had been excited by his subsequent statements. And on the other hand she was already feeling a great deal more confidence in this young man than she would have done had he approached her in ragged garments, boots down at the heel, and the manners of the two Bedrocks. Engaging manners, and clothes of fashionable appearance go a good way, even with a cautious woman of business. She answered his question promptly.

"Just as soon as I can see Mr. Jones, and learn what he can tell me in regard to the matter. From what you say you can simply take me to the mine; perhaps he will have some information that will serve as a guide to operations after we get there."

"Sorry, madame, if you are depending on him—that is, if you want to move promptly. I knew Mr. Jones of old, and learning that he was still in business hereabouts I made some inquiries this morning, before calling. He is not at home, and no one seems to know where he has gone. He may simply have gone somewhere without saying anything about it to any one; or it may turn out to be a case of mysterious disappearance, such as I have frequently noticed is apt to happen to parties who are mixed up with hidden treasures, and secret bonanzas. Deacon Obe has his reputation for honesty pretty firmly established or I might suggest that he has got track of the treasure, and is taking time by the forelock. I can assure you that there are others besides ourselves who are looking the thing up; and you will have to fight your way out if you want to carry it away. It looks a little odd that there should be such an interest just at this time; but we will no doubt find out the reason for it before we are done."

"It does seem singular; yet it can be accounted for. Probably my husband, who, as I said, had his peculiarities, left the letter which I received, to be forwarded a certain number of years after his death. This Deacon Jones may have been the man with whom it was left. In some manner the contents of that letter may have become known—You are certain that you had nothing to do with the forwarding of it?"

"Very certain, since I never had, until I met you, the slightest idea of the actual name of the man whom I am convinced was your husband. The explanation you offer is no doubt the true one, though I should like to have a talk with Obediah before I said positively that it is the only one. He may turn up in the course of the day; if he does not, you can be preparing yourself for a journey. If I was to offer a suggestion, it would be that you keep your movements to yourself, and leave the town without any one being aware of it—if that can be possible. No doubt the two tramps will be on the watch to dog your footsteps; and probably others. Really, if you like excitement, you are likely to have enough of it before you get through with this search. And unless Jones pans out on information better than I expect, the work will not be finished off-hand."

A gentle tap on the door interrupted Mrs. DeLangdon's answer.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TRAMPS SEEM TO FRATERNIZE.

"COME in!" said Mrs. DeLangdon, sharply.

The door opened slowly, until there was space for the party outside to thrust his head in. Then the face of Uncle Bedrock appeared.

"Ef you please, mum, jest a minnit. Ef I could on'y hev a word er two with ther young leddy, I mout be able ter give 'er some c'llat'ral informashun thet'd be usef'ul ez well ez eenterestin'. Not wishin' ter interfere with yer own perivate affairs, could she step out inter ther hall a weenty, teenty minnit, afore that other champion gits back? I found him a-listenin' at ther door an' fired him outen ther winder; but he's ther sort ez are mighty hard ter kill, an' he'll be apt ter be back afore long, an' I wanten kinder throw him off ther track. Ef I don't, you kin look out fur breakers accordin'."

Then he looked over at Cleo with his fattest

smile, and introducing one pudgy hand alongside of his face, beckoned gently.

Lawrence laughed, at the same time that he made a step toward the door. There was something so comical about the old fellow that he could not be as angry as he would have liked to have been, though he did not intend to allow any more intrusion, while he was present, at least. Another step, and his fingers would have no doubt been in the hair of Bedrock.

"Wait!" interposed Cleopatra.

"This seems to be a bit or miss sort of game, in which there is nothing sure but chances. This is the gentleman first on the ground, and I hope you will pardon me for saying frankly that I am inclined to have some confidence in him. From the way you two are beating about the bush, I have been suspecting that you would as soon that I was not present. You can continue your conference untrammelled by me, as I shall see what the gentleman with the ragged unmentionables has to say."

Before her mother could interfere, or Lester raise an objection, she had reached the door, passed out, and was walking with Bedrock along the narrow hall.

"Now, then, if you have anything to say to me say it quick. You must understand that I have little faith in the profit that will be found in this wild-goose chase; and if I had my way I would turn around to-morrow and take the back track. I am more than ever inclined to believe that there has been some sort of a plot formed to induce my mother to visit this country, and that every man we have met since we landed is interested in it. What part have you? You are not what you seem; who are you?"

She turned sharply on him as she asked the question; but if she expected to see any sign of confusion in his face she was doomed to disappointment. He nodded, grinned, and with a wink that was intended to be confidential, responded:

"Jess' so, jess' so! 'Twon't do ary bit ov hurt ter hev sich a idear. Make yer cau'shus, an' keep yer eyes wide open. An' Ginger Flat are a place whar them same things are allers in order. Dunno ez thar war ary plot in ther mind ov ole Swallow Tail, w'en he arranged fur this hyar visit; but you kin bet thet thar are plenty a-schemin' how they kin scoop ther widdar an' her fortun' in. Actooally, I are only ole Bedrock, thet hez tramped this hyer hull kentry over, year in, an' year out, a-lockin' fur me only boy, ez war lost some twenty odd year ago. Ef you sh'd see him yer mout know him by ther little silver plate tied ter his neck, with his name an' age 'graved thereon; an' by a jin'ral resemblance ter his onbappy dad—"

"Come, now, old gentleman, don't try to make too exciting a story or I shall take no stock in it at all. The most extraordinary resemblance that I have ever seen exists between you and that other man claiming to be the only original. You are alike as two peas in voice, feature and rags; and I could almost assure you that he was the long-lost darling. It is that resemblance that makes me suspicious; and it cannot be accounted for in any such nonsensical way. Tell the truth; what does it mean?"

"Thet's jest w'ot bothers me!" exclaimed Bedrock, bringing the palm of one hand against that of the other with a resounding slap.

"W'ot's ther meanin' ov it? W'ot's ther game? It's a mystry; an' it actooally makes me—ole Uncle Bedrock—skeered. I'm afeered thet thar are a scheme; an' it's w'ot I wanted ter see yer about. 'F I sh'd drap outen sight, an' this other fraud come ter ther front, a-claimin' me name, an' fambly relashuns, jest don't yer furgit it thet he orter be fit tooth an' nail. Wickidness may indoor fur a season; but ther trewth is mighty an' will prevail, ef she makes ther right kinder a fight. You understand me?"

"I can't say that I do. What earthly interest can it be to me whether this man is, or is not, will be, or will not be, what he claims, or may claim? I want to assure you, and through you the others in this plot, that in the first place, there is nothing to be made out of my mother and me; and in the next, that we are fully on our guard against treachery and fraud. If there must be a fight, we will make it a bitter one, even if we are only two women. If you are wise you will drop your scheme, whatever it may be, and allow some one whom it better suits to play the part of the ragged rascal. That is all I have to say to you; and unless you have something that has a more direct bearing than anything you have yet uttered, we may as well part at once."

"An' she kin re-cognize ther remains ov ther lost gentility in ther wreck w'ot now are known ez Bedrock, ther tramp! Trewly, I admire! This one cau'shun le'mme give yer afore we supperate. Look out fur Gen'ral Gloom; an' don't trust yerself too fur from ther supportin' column. He bez an' eye in your direckshun, an' would be a bad man ter git away from ef he war whar he could pay his attenshuns onrestrained by ther revolver ov yer uncle. But ef yer sh'd git in a tight place, trust in me an' my we'pins. We'll be around, an' ready ter act accordin' ter ther case. Sorry ter tear meself away, but after thet warnin' dunno thet ther are more I kin say at ther present time, not even ter ask fur the loan ov a quarter. So long;

an' you kin wait fer ther rest tell I see yer later."

He made a motion as though he had some idea of shaking hands with Cleo; but as there was no responsive motion on her part he turned away slowly, and swaggered out of the hall where this conference had taken place. She was near the door, and, impelled by some suspicion, took a few steps forward, and looked cautiously out, to see in which direction the man went, and whether he was met by any one. He was joined by the other Bedrock, and the two walked away together in what seemed to be an amicable manner. If she had been near enough to hear what was said she would probably have felt that she had been doing injustice to the great original. The meeting with the other tramp was entirely unexpected; and his words showed that there was no collusion between them.

"Say, pard, this hyer resemblance are goin' ter make any dog-goned amount ov trouble ef we two keep stackin' ther keyards ag'in' one another. Sich ez we be we be, an' it can't be rubbed out. 'Tain't my fault, an' it ain't yourn. W'ot's ther use ter quarrel with ther workin's ov Providence?"

"W'ot's a quarrelin'? I bin a-takin' it eazy ez a lam'. Ef I warn't a sorter philosofiser I'd a' hed me back up long ago, an' a-peekin' thro' ther sights ov me revolver ter send yer over the range. Oh, Uncle Bedrock takes things ez he finds 'em; an' thet's sayin' a heap fur this Jim-blasted kintry. But w'ot war yer perposin'? I'm ready fur reason; tho' I ain't a-takin' ther back track on ther statement thet I'm ther great 'riginal."

"Thet's all right. W'ot's ther matter with me bein' another? Can't yer see it? One Bedrock might wake 'em up at Ginger Flat; but two orter strike 'em blind, ef it don't parylize 'em. S'pose we j'ine forces, an' work ther camp fur w'ot it's worth? How does that strike yer royal nibs?"

"Right whar I live," was the immediate answer, while the ready paw was extended with spread fingers. "Put her thar, pard, righ thar."

CHAPTER XVII.

BEDROCK CALLS FOR COIN AND GETS SOMETHING ELSE.

In watching the two Bedrocks Cleopatra wasted just enough time to cause her to miss seeing Lucky Lester as he left the presence of her mother. She found the madame alone, and reticent as to what further had been said or agreed upon during the remainder of the interview.

Later on in the day the store of Deacon Jones was visited, and the statement as to his absence verified. Beyond that nothing seemed to be done in regard to the object of their visit to Ginger Flat. And night came and wore along without seeing anything further of Lester Lawrence.

That individual had some preparations to make; and to crown all, was uncomfortably short of funds. He was pretty certain that he had provided a way for future conferences with Miss Cleopatra, and at times when he would have more leisure. He did not care to meet her at present, since she might attempt to interfere with his plans; and as he had gone so long without being blessed with the light of her countenance it required no great amount of self-denial to do without seeing her a little longer. When evening came he went around to the Gilded Claw, again.

Everything was running along after a quiet fashion, and there was no sign of Long Bill. That individual had got out of the trouble the previous evening without meeting with any accident; but he was wise enough not to show up again. Lawrence recognized a number of faces he had seen there on his previous visit, however; and without much trouble scraped up an acquaintance with some of their owners. Before he had been in the place half an hour he was deep in a profitable game. Luck seemed to be with him from the outset, and the little capital with which he had begun was already ten times as large as it had been, and spectators began to crowd near the table to see how the stranger sport got along with his streak, when there was a slight commotion, that caused him to raise his head; and he saw the two Bedrocks, arm in arm, advancing toward where Mike was standing, just at the open end of the bar.

Lawrence did not allow the appearance to interfere with his game; but at the same time he managed to keep a watch on the two. He had an interest in them. Worthless though they might seem to a casual observer he was satisfied that one of them at least was more than he seemed, and seeing them come in together caused him to include the other in the same category, although, up to this day, he had never imagined the original Bedrock to be other than he looked. But if they had designs on the Swallow Tail bonanza—as he believed—what were they doing at the Claw—which was one of the most unhealthy places for them that they could find?

It did not require a long wait to discover what they were after, and Lester was disgusted. As far as could be seen they had come in solely

and expressly to get up a row, and visitors at Mike's, with such a hope, were seldom disappointed.

Mike recognized his man as soon as he laid eyes on him; but, like Lester, was curious to know what was his little game. He waited until the two halted right in front of him, and then gave them his attention. One of them was speaking; though it was hard to tell whether he was or was not the one who had done the playing on the previous evening. In his hand he held quite a fist-full of checks, which he was slowly fingering over in a way that made them come together with a little click.

"Yes, it's er fine evenin'; but pard an' me ain't takin' much stock in ther weather. We ain't on ther tramp jest so much ez we sometimes war; an' we dropped in on er leetle bit ov arrand, which oughtn't ter keep us more ner a minnit. Ez I left ther house in a bit ov a hurry las' nite I did't hev time ter cash in; an' I brung ther chips ez I war ahead ov ther game ter git ther ready John Davis fur ther same. It's quite a pile, but I reckon thar's nothin' ther matter with ther Claw, an' it won't strain her resources. Thar they be; an' ez I tole pard, jest ez good ez wheat. Shell I count 'em, or shell you?"

This was pretty cool talk to a man with as hot a temper as Mike Willard was known to carry; but, as Mike had got the worst of it the previous evening, it was a point of honor with him to restrain himself until there was an opening for immediate action. He laughed shortly as he answered:

"I have heard of cheek amazing; but I must say that you lay over any thing I ever met with in that line. Why, my friend, you had your offer last night, and didn't take it. Don't you know that we close our books at the end of every day, and don't do a credit business for any one? And when I was bringing the money, and my pard was just begging you to take it, didn't you turn around and split my head wide open? Any other man would have been booting you out by this time; and if you want to have all over again you won't have to stay here more than ten seconds more 'by the watch and you will be on your way to kindom come in a rejoicing shape. Lem and I are both on to you, and you don't get the advantage on us twice hand-running, you can bet."

"Hole on, hole on! Thar's whar yer mistook-en; an' that's w'y pard an' me come together—so you could see w'ot a mistake you war a-makin'. It war me ez did ther playin' las' nite, an' won ther pot ov coin; an' it was him ez did ther fightin', thro' a unfortunate misunderstandin' ov w'ot you war after. That war w'y I brung him along. He war afeared thet you might hev hard feelin's, thet couldn't be helped unless yer hed ther chance ter try it all over ag'in. You cash in my chips; an' he'll give yer all ther chance yer wants ter give him a soaker. Ef thet ain't a fair offer I dunno w'ot ter say. Hyer's ther pile; Gimme w'ot's comin' to me, an' then go fur him ez hard ez yer hev a mind ter. He's ther fightin' member ov ther corporashun; an' I'm ther one thet keeps ther treasury, an' does ther ruinin' ef thar's any required. W'ot does yer say?"

Mike looked the two over, and the sight puzzled him. If there had been any little points in which the resemblance was not perfect they had been remedied since the two had joined hands in the partnership; and for the life of him Mike could not say which it was that had so neatly straightened him out. And the puzzle was provoking, for though it would be possible to pommel them both, it was not going to be the satisfaction he had been looking for. He would not be giving the right man the extra pounding, or he might be giving the wrong one too much. In addition, it began to strike him that though he had seen hummers with as much cheek, they seldom if ever had as much sand to back it. He might have lost more valuable time had it not been for his partner, who came up in time to hear the closing of Uncle Bedrock's remarks.

"It don't matter which is which. We can bounce them both, and the one or the other of us will get even. You take this one, and I will go for the other. And don't be too easy about the way you do the job. They carry shooting irons, and if there is half a chance will use them. Look out for their heels; and here goes!"

Lem was not a large man, but he made up for lack of size in the earnestness with which he applied himself to business. Before he was done speaking he had hold of his man, had twisted him over his hip, and was dragging him toward the door. That they did not use pistols in the argument was really due to the fact that they had lately had some difficulties of the kind, which had caused some comment; and unless there was a clear case of justification neither of the partners desired to have a shooting scrape on his hands, though they were not of the kind to stand any nonsense.

The ease with which the Bedrock who fell into the hands of Lem was disposed of was a matter of surprise not only to him but to the spectators. After the lively time that one of the tramps had made, it was supposed that either of them would be hard to handle; yet this fellow made no visible resistance, but suf-

fered himself to be dragged along in the most hopeless sort of way.

Mike Willard found that he had got hold of quite a different customer. It is true he had sized him up pretty well the previous evening, but he was then so taken by surprise that he credited largely to that the ease with which he had been disposed of. 'Most any man who had the weight, and knew anything at all about handling his fists, could have hit as hard when luck sent his counter home. If this was the same fellow—and he was inclined to think it was—he wanted to satisfy himself which was the better man; and so did not adopt the hurricane style of his partner. He threw up his hands, and made a step or two toward the tramp, all the time keeping his eyes fixed with his own. There was light enough to see what he was doing, and the patrons of the Claw were wise enough to give them plenty of room. Of course, there were those present who would have been glad to take a hand in on the side of the proprietors, but a warning motion by Mike restrained them.

Bedrock was as cool and as saponacious as ever.

"An' he's reely cumin' fur me—me, ther great 'riginal. I lay down me checks, an' he don't da'st ter cash 'em fur fear it'd bu'st ther shebang, an' the'r treas'ry'd go dry. 'Stid ov that he's goin' ter give me ther w'uth on me hide, an' leave me ter protest. It's w'ot I 'spected, an' when they tell 'bout ther squar' game et ther Claw, an' Flood, an' Keene, an' ther rest ov 'em talk 'bout a spesul trip ter try it on, I'll weep an' tell 'em how I war drawed on ter lose me last dime on ther tin-pot game w'ot warn't square after all. High, low, 'Mike! An' how does that suit yer royal nibs?"

After this fashion Bedrock reeled it off while he was squaring away. He was also moving his head from side to side, or lazily guarding to the feints and strokes of the angry gambler; and it was certain that he was in no great alarm, though the man who got into trouble with the proprietors of the Gilded Claw was supposed to be in the way of danger.

With such a racket going on, of course there was more or less interruption to the games that were in progress; and it helped to break up the seance in which Lucky Lester was engaged. The man opposite to him was wise in his day and generation, and found this a convenient place at which to stop. At least that was the interpretation which Lawrence put upon his actions, since, so far, the sport had been a winner, and the proposition to quit came from the other side.

"You are too strong for me to-night, pard; and I'll wait till the cards run my way before I open it up again with you," said the man, as he threw down his hand a short time after the tramps had presented themselves.

"You had a pretty good thing of it while it lasted, and you can't blame me if I want to see the fun that is bound to come. Wouldn't mind laying you a small bet that Mike gets the worst of it; but I'm not howling anxious. Things at the Claw are mighty uncertain; and a sure thing is more so."

"Thanks; but I would be backing the tramp if I invested. Sorry if you have to go; but we may meet again, and I shall be happy to give you your revenge if we do."

"That is all right; but if we start again it will be on a fresh basis, and this game won't belong to it. When I jump the board it is my lookout for the losses; and you will never hear me squeal about them. My name is Hark Havens, and I generally hang out here about this time in the evening. If you are about to-morrow I shall be happy to meet you, but I shan't ask you to go out of your way."

Lester had recognized the gambler when he took his seat at the table with him, so that he only bowed at the mention of the name, though he was about to give his own when the exercises at the bar became so interesting that neither thought of continuing the conversation. One of the tramps had already been ejected from the door; and Lem Lane was coming back to see how it was faring with the other.

A glance was sufficient to see that his partner was making but little progress; and he came pitching forward to take a hand in. He would have been on the back of Uncle Bedrock, with heavy fists, and both feet, if it had not been for an interruption. Before he could imagine what was coming Hark Havens stood in his way.

"Easy, Lem; just as e-a-s-y. Mike seems to want to give us some fun, and I'm a friend of Mike's. Don't crowd us till we see whether he is going to change his mind. It may be that he would hit you by mistake as he put in a pile-driver, and then there would be two men sorry, if no more."

"Get out out of the way, Havens!" shouted the gambler. "This is a set-up job, and I am going to show the man that put it up that it won't work here. You can bring on your bulies, and your fighting men; but pard and I are able for the best of them. Stand aside or I will think that you are in the scheme."

"Think what you please; but I wouldn't spoil the reputation of the place for fair play by double-teaming a man that has put up his hands in good faith. Come, I'll lay you a thousand

to five hundred that the stranger gets away with Mike if both stick to the fists and the new rules. If you are a sport that ought to be big enough odds to raise a bet out of you."

"It's my night off, and I'm not betting to-night; but if you want to see the fun so bad I'll let it go. All the worse for the tramp, though. I might have saved his life if I had got hold of him, and rolled him out as I did the other. Now he will have to settle it with Mike. If pard don't break his neck he will be mad enough to shoot, and that will make us a heap more trouble."

Lester was listening to all this, and thinking it strange that Havens should interfere; and, stranger still, that a man like Lem should so quietly accept his more than suggestion, and give in without even a show of anger. It looked to him as if Hark was looking for a chance to draw on Lem, or else, for some reason he was anxious to protect the tramp. The latter was a possible explanation; but he was more inclined to the former.

Whatever may have been his reason, Hark watched the contest with an interest that even he, thorough-paced gambler that he was, could not disguise.

And Uncle Bedrock made it exceedingly interesting, even though he was slow to strike, and rather seemed to be bent on playing light.

Now and then he dropped a little one somewhere about Mike's head, in a way that ought to have convinced that individual that if Bedrock chose to extend himself he could repeat the performance of the previous evening without much trouble.

"Curse you, why don't you strike?" exclaimed Mike, at last, as Primrose easily warded off a stroke of his own, and then tapped him lightly on the mouth.

"On'y waitin'," laughed the old fellow, as he clumsily shifted away from what was intended as a vicious return. "Be'chyer sweet life ef I do let go, you won't be askin' any question much afore mornin'. But mebbe ef I give yer a chance you'll git yer thinkin'-cap on, an' see it's a heap sight better ter cash them checks then ter mebbe go inter ther bone-yard."

Perhaps that was the reason; but as Bedrock ceased speaking there was a change in him that was electrical. It appeared to be the sound of a shrill whistle from without that worked the change. He straightened himself up, and then suddenly let drive as hard as he could send it.

There was no use to guard against a blow like that, and Mike Willard was too slow to dodge. Right on the jaw it landed, and Mike went down like a sack of meal, just as Lem Lane and two or three others threw themselves at the tramp.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MAN IN A CLOAK.

If the gang that was attacking him had come only with their fists it would not have been so bad for Uncle Bedrock, but they came prepared for a different kind of war. Lem Lane had a life-preserver in his hand, and the rest carried clubs. It was evidently their intention to get away with the old man in a very rough style, though the fact that no one had a pistol drawn showed that they did not mean to kill, unless by way of accident. In that case it would not be hard to show justification. According to the strict letter of the law, in such places made and provided, the tramp was fair game, in consideration of the manner in which he had entered the house.

Not a bit did all this trouble Bedrock. His fighting blood was fairly up, though he was as cool as ever, and he faced the crowd with doubled fists, and his average genial smile.

Nor did he allow the attack to be all on one side. He sprung forward, slung his fists out to this side and that, and had two men down before they knew he was in distance. Then he caught hold of a third, and raising him without an apparent effort, flung him right in the face of Lane, who was darting on him with his billy raised.

The result was a confused heap on the floor, and excitement that brought almost every one in the room as near to the scene of action as was possible, and such close quarters that the science of Bedrock would have availed him nothing if the enemy had been in condition to again attack him.

But the confusion was really just what he wanted. He had no idea of fighting the town, and did not wait for the town to fight him. He shook off the half-dozen hands that were stretched out to detain him, and flung himself into the crowd in a manner that made a way for him. Right along he ground until he reached the door, striking no one; but elbowing here and shoving there, making a way without much apparent effort, and vanishing before Lem Lane had managed to crawl from under the two or three men who had fallen on top of him.

"After him! Fetch him back! I'll give fifty for a fair show at him!"

Lem was a little wild, or he would not have been making such an offer. He had already had his fair show at the man, and the chances were that he would not come off so luckily again.

Lester had seen the whole affair with a good deal of curiosity as to how it was going to end,

though his sympathies were with the tramp. He felt like drawing a long breath when he saw the fellow vanishing, even though this was the second time that he had interrupted his evening's enjoyment at the Gilded Claw. He suspected that there was something behind all that he had seen, though he could not imagine what it was, or think of a way to find out unless he questioned Bedrock himself. And the chances of getting the truth out of the old reprobate were slender indeed, if he had any scheme that amounted to anything.

And yet, the action of Hark Havens told him something. The whistle outside had been heard by the latter, and Lawrence saw that he started at the sound; and then pushed away from the spot, toward which every one else was crowding. He would have followed him if he could have done so, but the crowd between wedged him in so that it was impossible.

As the next best thing he followed Bedrock, getting out of the house as quickly as possible.

There were others bent on the same mission; but Lester's luck was better than theirs—perhaps because he knew better where to look. He struck the trail of the man almost immediately, and stole behind him, as he swiftly and silently glided away from the scene of the late disturbance. Lawrence was not surprised to see that he was joined before long by his double, and that the meeting was, on one side at least, not very cordial. If the two had come to blows, it would only have been what might have been expected from the way in which they acted in the outset. The one who had just downed Mike Willard shook his fists at the other; and if he was not doing some loud talking, it was because he did not care to attract toward them the attention of any casual passer who might be near.

The other made gestures that were meant to be mollifying; and finally, getting near enough to obtain possession of his arm, led him away, while carrying on a whispered conversation.

"Self-evident that Number Two has gone back on the original arrangement, whatever it was; and that Number One wants to call him to account. Had Number Two anything to do with the signal that I will swear some one gave? Or, if it wasn't meant for him, it was for some one else. I feel pretty sure they are all in the racket to get the old man's gold; but what I would like to know is, whether they are playing a lone hand, each on his own account; or whether there is to be a grand divy when Eli gets there. If one could only hear what they are saying, he might form some sort of an idea. It might be safe to draw up a little closer; but a fellow wants to be careful. The old fellow is not half as big a fool as he looks; as Ginger Flat is no doubt ready to admit. And he would as soon shoot to kill as cripple; and would be mighty apt to do one or the other if he caught sight of some one lurking near. Nevertheless, I think I will try it. There is a chance, if they don't move away any further."

Watching them narrowly, and thus communing with himself, Lawrence began to move closer. He was not used to being a hidden listener; but the work he was engaged in seemed to justify the act, and so he crawled nearer and nearer, all the time somewhat ashamed of himself for spying upon the words and actions of two such objects as these, even though he thought they were something more than their looks indicated.

Still, luck was in his favor, and in a short time he had gained a position where he could manage to catch a good deal of what they had to say; and though it was hard to make sense of what he at first heard, since he had lost the opening of their conversation, before long he was able to supply a part of the missing words from what he made out as they went along.

The second Bedrock was assuring the other that it was through no fault of his that he had been so summarily ejected from the Claw; and that he landed in the street with such force that for a while he knew nothing. By the time he had recovered his senses the fun inside was about over. Bedrock was making his way toward the door, and he thought it was time for him to be moving. As to the whistle, he declared that he had not heard it, and knew nothing about it. If there was one it was not a signal of his, nor did he know who gave it. Perhaps it would be a good plan to go back and see if they could find out what it was about.

Then the other reproached him with having set a game up on him, and inducing him to strike up a row, out of which he was to draw his own peculiar profit, without his pard being the wiser or the better. And if that was the way it was going to be, the sooner the partnership was dissolved the better.

From anything they said it was not possible to tell that they were not a pair of tough cases, quarreling over the bad faith of which each suspected the other.

"All the same, there was a signal," thought Lester. "If it was not intended for these fellows, it may have been for Hark Havens. It might have been better to have kept closer to him, though I have not made up my mind that one or the other of these gentlemen is not a confederate of his. This is not leading me to the bonanza very fast, or filling my pockets with

much-needed coin, but I think I will hold on a little longer, and see where they go to."

After all, it was time and labor thrown away. The two men ceased their bickering, after a little, and, arm in arm, rolled away to the Hole in the Wall, a saloon that seemed exactly suited to persons of their ilk. Lawrence got a glimpse of them through the window, and saw that they appeared to be very much at home; then he left them to their own devices. He was more than ever disgusted with the luck that seemed to make it necessary to follow such customers, and if it had not been for Cleo he would have thought seriously of giving up the search for the hidden treasure before it had fairly begun.

It was late to look after Hark Havens; and, as a comparative stranger in the camp, he was compelled to trust to his own eyes, rather than to answers from strangers who might be in the very ring whose existence he had begun so strongly to suspect. As it was also too late to endeavor to obtain an interview with Cleo he determined to go back to the Claw, and see if fortune had not something yet in store for him at that thriving resort. So far he had not been drawn into the difficulties that had taken place during his presence there, so that he could still visit it without the danger of being a marked man. By this time the excitement had probably quieted down somewhat; and if he obtained no intelligence, there was the chance for a game which might recruit his finances.

Thinking all this over he strolled toward the saloon, and as he entered it, came face to face with a man in a cloak, who halted abruptly, and stared him steadily in the face.

Lester returned the compliment in kind, and fancied he recognized the individual who had intruded upon the interview with Cleo, the previous evening. If instincts and a hazy recollection went for anything, this was the man she had called Leo Dunning.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE STRANGER TRIES TO MAKE THINGS COMFORTABLE.

"STRANGER in the town, eh?" remarked the man in the cloak, without the least hesitation, when he saw that the gaze of Lester was fixed on him.

"Something like myself. And mighty unsocial sports they are, here. All of them gone wild about a little knock-down argument that the proprietors have been having with some thief of a tramp. If that is the kind of cattle they keep hanging round here, one hardly feels like making much of a stay. Still, they tell me it is the best in town, so what is a man to do? If you think as I do, what is to hinder our making it mutually interesting for each other? I have been looking for a man they call Hark Havens, but he seems to have got scared out by the racket, and can't be found. He promised to meet me an hour ago, and if this is the way he keeps his promises he is no better than the rest of them."

Lawrence was ready to believe that he had been mistaken, when the stranger spoke. Certainly this was not the voice that he had heard the preceding evening. There was something about the stranger that suggested he might be an ex-military officer. Whoever he was, Lester was ready to cultivate him. He answered promptly:

"A stranger of two days' standing, and, like yourself, not at all in love with the town. Lawrence is my name, and I can place myself at your service until Mr. Havens comes. He was here a short time ago, and left a game, as I understood it, because he had a prior engagement. He may be hunting you now, and will perhaps turn up before long. This will no doubt be as good a place as any to wait for him."

"You saw him, did you? What did you make out of him? Does he look as though he might be an honest man, even if he does sport for a living? I ought to know, because I was thinking of trusting him some in a matter of business, and if he is not an honest man I would be at his mercy."

"Havens may be honest enough, but when it comes to business, and money matters, the less you are trusting any one the better, especially a stranger. Never saw the outsider I would trust with two dimes if it was worth his while to accumulate them, or a matter to give me trouble if I lost them. Wouldn't trust you; and I shouldn't like to ask you to trust me, unless there was a security somewhere against loss. I leave such work for Uncle Bedrock and his sort."

"Bedrock? Ah! The man who was at the bottom of this racket they have been having. Must have been a holy terror from the way he got off with the luggage of everybody. Sorry I didn't get here in time to see him. Perhaps he would have been the man for my money. Have seen a tramp dressed up before now, and put into the way of doing big things. When one of the tribe gets his grip again, his experience goes for a great deal. Sorry you feel as you do, because I was thinking that if Havens wouldn't do, perhaps I had found the man for my money when I struck you. How is that? Will you take it back? There is big wealth for somebody if he is the right stripe."

"Thanks, but I have contract enough on my

hands for the present, and I don't like to tie myself up too far ahead. Meantime, will you join me?"

"I suppose I must patronize the house, as long as I am in it; and there is not another man here that I would sooner drink with. Of course. And note the two black eyes of the gentleman behind the bar. They are just lovely. It makes me want to know the man that is going around dispensing such treasures."

"That is Mike Willard, one of the proprietors," said Lawrence, looking in the direction indicated. "From what they tell me he is no slouch, in spite of the frescoes on each side of his nose. But he met an extraordinary man, who gave it to him just too hot. I have a curiosity to hear what he will have to say."

There was not much trouble in doing that, as his voice was distinct enough at a dozen feet from the bar. He squinted at the two strangers as they came up, and then went on with what he was saying. He always did talk for two, and just now he was doing it literally, as Lem was saying nothing at all. Lone had fared a great deal better in the fight, and so, probably, thought he had nothing to say.

Having taken their poison the two strolled back to the table near which they had been standing, and dropped into seats. Lester asked no questions, and so, after a little desultory conversation they naturally drifted into a game of cards.

"Evidently, my night on," said Lawrence, after he had raked in a couple of the larger pools.

"I was more than holding my own with Hark, and when a man can say that I reckon there is no discount on his luck."

"Yes, you do seem to hold over me; but my time will be along by and by. Bad thing for Hark that he missed me. He would have found a regular lamb for the slaughter. And the luck in meeting me is yours. Don't be too modest to make the most of it."

When it came to playing draw, modesty was not likely to harm Lester Lawrence; and he was after the stranger as hard as the money in his pocket would allow. If he had not loaned to Mrs. DeLangdon the better part of his coin he would have been hitting the game much harder than he did, though the short game with Havens had put something of a lining into his pockets. He was playing with all of his natural confidence, though of course keeping a covert watch on the stranger, to see that he did not attempt to assist fortune, or eke out a slender hand by additions from the deck-head. He had none too much confidence in human nature, as he had expressed himself; and was not inclined to believe this man any better than the average.

Yet, none of his doubts appeared in eye or manner, and he handled the cards, a picture of smiling unconcern. It made no difference whether or no this was Leo Dunning. It appeared to be his last chance to replenish his almost empty purse, and he was determined to make the most out of him.

"And this time I think I have you," said the stranger, carefully sorting over his cards. "I'll take two cards, and run the risk."

"There you have them; and good ones they are, no doubt. What are you doing in such an emergency?"

The emergency seemed to be one on which each party was willing to meet after the same fashion. After the manner of masters they proceeded with the betting; neither too high, nor too low in the amounts named, until finally the stranger laid down a sum that exceeded Lawrence's ability to cover.

"Sorry my friend," Lester interposed. "You have struck me at a bad time; and I find that my pocketbook is even weaker than I supposed when I sat down. I would be only too happy to rush the game up a few notches higher were it not for the fact that I have no more coin. A sight for my money is the best that I can do under the present circumstances. If things pan out as I would ordinarily be willing to bet a few more thousands that they will, I can give you a harder hustle later on."

Although Lester smiled as he spoke, and threw down his available capital, as though its meager amount was rather a good joke than anything else, he felt more than provoked that he should have to stop; and, to tell the truth, a trifle ashamed, to boot. Whether this was that other husband or not, when a man has been picked out for a thoroughbred it is disgusting to have to figure only as a lame duck.

"Don't object to a hustle now, or later on. Since you mentioned your name I have been trying to place you; and if I am not mistaken you are the party sometimes called Lucky Lawrence. I would just as soon hold your obligations, as not; that is what it would amount to. If you are close run and want a loan it is at your service; or, if you want to continue the game you can pile up no stakes as high as my pocketbook will stand it to call, and it will be all right. Of course, I expect you will be able to make an early settlement. Your word on it, and you can name your amounts."

"Thanks, awfully; and if I was in proper fighting trim I don't know but what I would accept your offer as freely as it seems to be made. But just now I am in business in another line, and am

not sure how I am going to come out of it. If I should happen to go up the flume, and no assets for my executors to work on, it wouldn't be exactly the fair thing to either you, or my reputation. Suppose we stop right there."

"Stop it is; and if you can beat an ace-full you can take the pot."

"Four of a kind, and an ace behind them will do that very thing; and there they all are," said Lester, throwing down his cards, as he named them.

"Good enough. That hand takes my money; and would have taken a heap sight more if you had been willing to run the risks. I am afraid that you are not a good gambler after all. Really, I must have you. Just a week or two will it take you; and in that time I think I can promise you more than you will make over the table in a year. What say you?"

"Better go on with the game. I am too rich just now to be open to temptation. If I had lost on that hand there is no telling what I might have been willing to do. And, by the way, is there any possibility that your name is Dunning, and that we have met at least once before?"

"To half of that I can say there is every chance in the world, as I have been called Dunning, and nothing else, since I was first wanted to come to supper. But so far as I know we have never met before; not, at least, to speak. I have a pretty good memory for faces; and I would have remembered yours the moment I clapped eyes on it again I am sure. I wish you had lost if it would have brought you my way; and if my business was such that I could wait, I would hold on with it until you had finished the work that you say you have in hand. I don't feel like tempting you with a higher bid—if I understood you aright you were working, or going to work, for some one else—but if money is an object—as it generally is—I can make it right with you."

"Money is no object in this case. One thing at a time, and, first come first served, are my mottoes. Of course it is flattering, and all that, to have such an offer from a stranger, but I will have to decline. You are probably not the Dunning I had in my mind. He was in the East some years ago, and while there married a young lady with whom I was acquainted when I was ten years younger than I am now."

"Then you are off the track. I have a wife and several olive-branches; but I was married in 'Frisco, nearly ten years ago, when I resigned out of the army; and have not been East since. Will that knowledge help my case any? Or, if it will be in order, and it might help you to reconsider your determination, I could explain in a measure what it is that I want. There are two or three sides to the latter, and I could either promise you ten thousand for a successful ten days' work, besides all expenses, or I could, in addition, offer you something permanent, that would pan out large."

Lester was once more in doubt. If this man was named Dunning the coincidence was certainly remarkable; and if he was the Leo Dunning who had married Cleo, any statements of his were not likely to go a bit nearer to the truth than he would consider his interests demanded. At any rate he felt little like trusting the man; though he had met him with such apparent frankness. And yet, if anything he said could be believed, would it not be possible to obtain from him some information which might be of service to Cleo and her mother. He determined not to show any signs of interest in the affair in which the man appeared anxious to engage him; and yet try and leave the way open to gain any information that could be extracted from him.

"Explanations will keep," he said lightly. "Suppose we go on with this poker. When the game is over we may find it more to our mutual interest to engage in them. I feel I am in the vein to-night; and who knows where I will be tomorrow?"

"Poker, fudge! I think I can see the reason why Hark Havens jumped the game. He is probably as cool-headed as I am; and saw the signs in the sky. In the first place, unless there is a sudden change in luck, you are bound to win, if we keep on. In the second, if luck should turn I know exactly what it would amount to; and I must say that the sum total is scarcely sufficient to justify the risk—especially, when one takes into consideration the gilt-edge nature of your reputation. In a town like Ginger Flat one always has to look out for a possible finale of pistols for two, or a dozen."

"You scarcely mean to insult me?" asked Lawrence, seriously.

"And yet, it sounds something like it. I never began a shooting mess in my life; and you hardly look like the man who would shrink from something of the kind if it came along in the way of business."

"Correct you are. I never have flinched from shot or blow; and I had no intention whatever of courting either when I spoke. It's a blunt way I have, of speaking my thoughts; a thing that most men don't do, or there would be more murder done than ever. But it is a fact that I have taken a fancy to you, and if I can't have your services, perhaps I could get your advice."

"I have noticed that advice is just about as welcome as a bob-tail flush after the draw has been made; and I don't care about dealing you either. But if you won't play, I suppose we may as well talk, until a game opens out in some other direction. What have you to say?"

"Come now, you still feel hurt; and I don't know but what you have the right to. Let me tell you frankly, that since I knew who was against me, I was pretty certain that I would be the victim if the game kept up long enough. I am not a professional, well as I like a game; and I have heard of you and your luck. I don't think I can do anything with you to-night at draw; but perhaps my luck would come in at something else, and I'll make a proposition. I will cover your pile, and cut for the keeper. Or, I will play one game of Old Sledge to see who gets it. After that, unless you have some one else who can bring you more profit, under your eye, win or lose, we will talk the matter over, under your pledge of silence for the present; and you can then do as you choose. In spite of what you say, you may be able to give me some advice that will be acceptable; and if you don't, with a man with the reputation for square dealing that Lester Lawrence has, there will be no harm done."

"Agreed! One game of Old Sledge; and we cut for deal."

And into the center of the table Lester shoved every cent he had in the world.

CHAPTER XX.

DUNNING'S DOUBLE.

THE reason that Lawrence accepted the offer was simple enough. He saw that if he doubled what he had he would have sufficient to pay the note to General Gloom, about which he was more than anxious, since he felt that he was working with his hands tied so long as that obligation remained unpaid. It did not seem the fair thing to make a fight to the death—as he suspected he would have to—against a man who was his creditor.

If he lost he would be little worse off than he was at present. He had a ring or two, and a set of diamond studs, that he could put up for his hotel bill, and leave him a few dollars over in case he went out of the camp as guide to Mrs. DeLangdon. And win or lose, he would afterward find out who this Dunning really was.

In silence the two cut for the deal; Dunning won.

He shuffled the cards, dealt them after the cut, and examined his hand, without another word.

"Beg!" said Lester.

"Take," answered Dunning, and then the actual play began.

As the two men had been very quiet, and had proceeded with their game in a leisurely manner, so that it appeared that they were more interested in a friendly conversation than they were in regard to their winnings, they had attracted little attention. The gamblers were all gambling, and the loafers were gathered largely in a group, discussing the late fight, which was a subject that had not lost all interest for them. For that reason there were no spectators to what was perhaps as interesting a bit of play as Gilded Claw had seen for some time. Dunning started out to make everything; but he only scored high, low, jack. By careful play Lester saved the game, so that on the first hand the score stood three to two, and the deal then with Lawrence.

The second hand Lawrence turned jack, and ran them on the beg. The result was two for each in the play; making the game stand five apiece with the deal with Dunning for the next hand.

"Pretty evenly matched, as far as luck goes," he said, as he drew the cards together, and began to shuffle.

"As jacks seem to be in order I fancy my chances are a trifle the best. For Heaven's sake make a good cut, and then if one of the high-heeled gentry comes up, thou canst not say I did it."

"I'll trust you that far," answered Lester, as he saw that the cut was carefully and actually put in its place with the deck. "The twist of the wrist may beat eyesight on some occasions, but I'll swear it has not done so on this. Run them off and have the agony over."

There was not much agony about the face of either, though for Lester there was more at stake than he cared to remember. Around went the cards, dropping gently, like snowflakes, on a quiet Christmas eve.

"Beg!" said Lester, as the ace of hearts came up, and he noted that he had the king of that suit, in hand, and nothing to support it.

"Can't give on the trey, queen, when there is something better to run to. Guess you would have done better on a bold stand. The chances are all my way now."

Down went the turned card, and deftly Dunning dropped three more to each of them. Then, with a flirt that carried a suggestiveness of triumph, he brought up jack of hearts:

"Makes me six—and the ace settles the game. Looks as though my luck was at the front for all that is out."

"And it looks," said Lester softly, as the ace from Dunning's hand fluttered to the table, "as though you had nine cards still in hand. I don't want to make any rash observations, but, supposing you count."

At the low, steadily spoken words, Dunning's face, for just a second, was white to the mouth. There are some men who have the reputation of being dangerous persons to make mistakes with, especially if they are detected, and Lucky Lester was one of them.

But the color came back as suddenly as it went, and that showed Dunning to be no coward at heart; and perhaps the sudden changes went further to convince Lawrence that a real mistake had been made than all the words that could have been spoken.

"Correct you are. I would have given a thousand to have had you noticed the misdeal a moment sooner. Ten cards I have, and a worse disgusted man you never saw. At my time of life I ought to be hung for a misdeal like that."

Dunning went over his cards carefully, before he owned up so frankly.

"More likely the other man gets hung in such cases—after the shooting is over. If—but no matter. Lucky Lester has not lost after all. Before we try another deal let's see how it would have run if you had not made the confounded mistake."

"That's easily done. That confounded ace was the first card I saw when I picked up the original hand, and was the thing I ran to. Here you have it. This tenth card ought to have been the trump—and, by heavens! I would have won, in that case, since I had ace and deuce in hand. You are not called Lucky Lester for nothing. I have been playing cards for twenty years, and never did a thing like that before. It was the only thing that could beat me. After such a fluke fortune will not be apt to forgive; and I feel in my bones that the pot goes into your pocket when the hand is played. What's the rule of the house on a misdeal?"

"Blame the house! The best thing to do is to shuffle and try it over. Perhaps the luck is not all on one side. Some men would have waited till you tried to draw in the money, and then entered a protest of the kind that hurts. I confess that as you are a stranger I had my suspicions. As it turns out, it was a mistake, after all. The pot is still to be played for, and now my chance to win is the better. It is to be hoped there will be no more errors of that kind."

Whatever may have been the actual thoughts of the sport, he certainly put as little of the offensive as possible in his words, and Dunning accepted his rebuke with the air of a man who deserved it. He said not another word until the game was played to an end, and Lucky Lester had won.

"Now then, as that nonsense has been finished, I suppose we can talk over matters as we had arranged. There might be a better place than this, and if you have no objection it would suit me better to adjourn to it. There is no use to wait for Havens; and, to tell the truth, since I met you I am rather glad that he has not come."

"Flattery goes a good way with—some people," laughed Lester.

"I can't say that I enjoy it; and I would a good deal rather have gone on with the game that Havens jumped than dropped into this one with you. I can't help feeling as though in some way you had made me a present of more money than I care to take as a gift. I don't want to accuse you of scheming to lose; but if things had worked the other way, and the pot gone in your direction, I would not have been altogether satisfied. The Gilded Claw suits me well enough, but if you want to retire to the tombs, or some of the other waste places of the earth, and finish our conversation, I am at your service. I doubt if we will be as well satisfied with each other when we get through as we are at present."

"Of that we must run the chances, though I believe that you are mistaken," said Dunning, rising.

And as he drew himself up, Lester saw beyond him the figure of what he at first glance took to be a good-looking young man, of slender build and medium height. When this young man drew up with what might have been an angry gesture, shaking one hand warningly, and then turned and hurried out of the saloon, Lester with a start remembered Cleo, and the disguise of the night before.

"I was right in the first place," he thought. "This is the Dunning we are interested in. He is not my friend; and whatever he may have to propose will be for the sake of putting me in a hole. After what he said last night there can be no doubt but that he hates me badly enough to be ready for 'most anything. If there is a trap, and after such a warning if I should walk into it, I deserve the worst that I get. And all the same I must go along with him now. Cleo will perhaps watch us to see where we go; and after that, no doubt, go home. I ought to look after her, but she seems as able as any one living to take care of herself, and such a chance as this may not come again. We will have to have it out, some day, Mr Dunning and I, and there is no time like the present."

So he was thinking as he walked along by the side of Dunning, who had become quite reticent since they came into the street. Either he was thinking of what he should tell the sport, or he considered his affairs of too much importance to be spoken of in such a public place. In truth, all that he had said up to the present time had been of the vaguest description.

To no cave or den did he lead Lester, but to a room in the Rising Sun. Everything there seemed to indicate that he was only a transient guest, and from the traveling sachel at the foot of his bed he drew out some wonderfully good cigars, one of which he lighted, leaving the rest convenient for Lawrence to help himself. Then, after a moment of thoughtful silence, he began:

"No doubt you think I have taken a strange fancy when I tell you that you are the man for my money, and perhaps you will even feel insulted when I explain further what it is that I want you to engage in. Still, I think that I will be able to prove that I mean no disrespect in the proposition that I have made, and that if you accepted it, you might be able to do my work better than nine men out of ten who would be glad to undertake the job, and would claim that they were specially fitted for it. I am in search of a man who will be hard to find; and a rank bad one when he is found. You can work on a vein which I cannot touch; and your experience with men and manners would be of use to you in following up the trail I have been on after him for some years. Now, I am pretty well assured that the man is somewhere in this neighborhood; but under what guise, or in what he is engaged, is more than I can tell. The ordinary processes of law are not of much account here, and I want to get a man to help me make the law to suit ourselves, and get him back where there are such things as courts of justice, and stone jails. I will give ten thousand dollars to have him safe in State Prison; and you are the man to help me put him there."

"Well, I must say!" began Lester, taken somewhat aback. "I have been suspected of a great many things, but I don't remember of ever being suspected of belonging to the detective service. What has the fellow done, for I see that you are bitter enough over him to hint at the worst?"

"Everything. When I tell you that he not only stole my belongings, as far as they were movable, but even took my name, and tried to drag it through the mud, you may understand that I have some cause to be bitter. Add to this the fact that he did his best to kill me, and no doubt thought he had succeeded, and you can have some idea why I swore to run him down, and why I am now trying to make my oath good. A lucky turn of fortune's wheel saved me from ruin, and I am now better off than I was before; but I will never forgive him, and I will hardly try to forget till the iron doors are closed on him."

Was Dunning really in earnest? or was this part of the scheme which Lawrence had been suspecting? He looked thoughtfully at the man, and tried to make out whether the emotion he showed was genuine.

"I have been taking my time, you will perhaps say, but that was a necessity. As far as was possible I was after him from the moment I was able to move at all; but I did not intend to wreck myself in the pursuit. Of late I have been more than ever successful in my speculations; and to-night is the first time in years I have come across a man whose luck seemed better than my own at anything in which chance had something to do, save in the matter of finding this fugitive, who seems to be flourishing for a time wherever he goes. That is one reason why I am able to give myself up altogether to the chase at present. And there is another reason why I am active just now. The villain robbed me of all that he could reach that was my own and of some things that were not my own. Among other things, of some papers relating to a secret mine. They should be in my possession just now, of all times, since the proper owners will no doubt soon put in an appearance, and ask for an account of the way I have executed my trust. I will not have the papers, while this rogue will, and no doubt will use them for his own benefit, if he has not done so already. Oh! he is a towering villain; and one who knows how to play his cards whatever the game. When he stole my name he took my face also, and to this day I meet men who fancy that they recognize him in me. If you ever hear of the misdeeds done by Leo Dunning, remember that it is not I that should be called to account, but my double, who posed so successfully as the real Leo Dunning."

CHAPTER XXI. WHERE IS CLEOPATRA?

THE murder was out at last, although, for some time, Lester had been suspecting to what the exordium was going to lead. So the Leo Dunning who figured in the East was the wicked partner of the man before him, and the two resembled each other so closely that even Cleo had been mistaken as to the man.

That looked like a plausible explanation,

though Lawrence did not at once settle it so in his own mind. True it might be; and in that case he was sure that the other Dunning was somewhere near. He made no comment, but simply asked:

"Would you have any hesitation in mentioning who was the original owner of this hidden mine, and where it is to be found? I am not sure but what I may be able to tell you something about the fellow, now, and pick up more information for you after awhile."

"It is hardly a secret. The original locator of the mine was an eccentric individual, best known as Old Swallow Tail. He had me attend to some business for him and I did it so successfully that he appeared to have full confidence in me. He died something like five years ago, and only a few days before he passed in his checks intrusted the papers to me. They were marked, 'To be given to my wife—'"

Lawrence had been deeply interested, and was waiting anxiously to hear how the papers were inscribed, when there came an interruption not down on the bills. There was a commotion in one of the rooms not far away, and then the scream of Mrs. DeLangdon was heard in the hall.

"Cleo!" she called, "Cleo, where are you?"

Lawrence had almost forgotten that the young lady was roaming about the town, in the garb of the other sex. He had been provoked when he saw her, or the individual that he supposed to be her, at the Claw; though, as she had left the saloon before he and Dunning took their departure, he had been pretty sure that if she did not succeed in obtaining an interview with him she would return to her own room. He could not imagine that she would go roving around the streets simply for the purpose of adventure, and if she was not back something must have happened. He was interested in what Dunning was saying, but he was more interested in the safety of Cleopatra DeLangdon.

He sprang to his feet, at the sound of the lady's voice, and with a word of hurried excuse dashed out of the room, to find the madame, with a night-cap on, and her wrapper hastily thrown about her, looking very much alarmed. There was a lamp burning in the hall, and by its light she recognized Lawrence.

"Oh, I am so glad to see you!" she exclaimed. "Something has surely happened to my daughter. I awoke to find that she was not there, and at first waited, more than half asleep, and feeling no particular alarm. But, she did not come, and I grew wide awake. I got up and looked. Some thief has been in the room, for my trunk has been opened, and its contents scattered around it on the floor. They must have harmed her—perhaps carried her away. She may have awakened, seen the robbers, followed them—she was brave enough for anything—and come to grief. Look for her! See if you can learn anything about her! quick! I do not want to make a scene; but, where is Cleopatra?"

The truth might have quieted Mrs. DeLangdon, or changed her grief and alarm to indignation; but the truth was just what Lawrence did not care to tell. All he could do was to make some commonplace remarks, as reassuring as he could think of on the spur of the moment, and promise to go in search of the young lady. He told the madame that he did not think there was any cause for alarm; and advised her by all means to keep her own counsel for the present, or until he returned; and sent her back to her room somewhat comforted, while he started for the street.

Although he was not willing to admit to himself that anything serious had happened, he reproached himself that he had not dropped everything and followed the masquerading miss when she left the Gilded Claw. He was anxious to learn all that he could both about Leo Dunning and the different parties who had their eyes on the hidden cache at the Old Swallow Tail discoveries; but the safety of Cleo was of the first importance. If he succeeded in finding her, he intended to impress on her mind the folly of any such romantic notions as appearing in disguise, and endeavoring to find out for herself anything that he could attend to with less risk, and more certainty.

"Confound it! I may as well have it out with the lady at first as at last. From some things that she has let drop, and the way that she has approached me, I am inclined to believe that my case is not as hopeless as it once was, and I don't believe that there will be anything gained by waiting. If she intends to be Mrs. Manton Dunning to the world as well as to myself, the sooner she understands that I am the responsible individual of the firm in all purely business affairs, the better it will be for both of us."

He had reached the street door, and just stepping out when he heard a noise that caused him to stand with suspended foot, peering anxiously in the direction whence it came. A dozen horsemen were approaching at a hard gallop; and to his practiced ear it sounded like a coming invasion. What that meant in a town like Ginger Flat he was only too well aware; and the idea of Cleopatra being out in the way of it was maddening.

He had but little time to think what was the best to do under the circumstances. So far the

only noises made had been by the hoofs striking on the hard trail; but now pandemonium broke loose. With savage yells the horsemen opened fire, flourishing a revolver in each hand, while their reins lay loosely on the necks of the horses they guided, so far as they did guide them, with their knees.

"Sounds like cowboys on a tear; but what are cowboys doing here? They may not mean harm, but I notice that when they are slinging their lead around so freely they generally manage to hit somebody, and if the town turns out for a fight it will be a rank bad thing for a woman to be caught between the lines. And it will be all the worse for her if they take her for a boy. What is the best thing I can do?"

The horsemen went swooping past, striking in the direction of the Gilded Claw; and the pistol-shots ceased for a little as they recharged their revolvers. Then they drew up and began to execute a series of maneuvers, attended with noise enough to wake the town.

The result was what might have been expected; and probably what they were aiming at. There was an outpouring from all the saloons, and shanties; and though there was no immediate rush for the spot, all faces were turned in that direction. As nearly every man had a revolver in his hands the chances were that a war would begin before long. Ginger Flat was always on its dignity; and as a general thing did not allow any mob of strangers to take the town, without at least a battle for it.

Of course, the Rising Sun emptied itself of its fighting men almost on the first alarm, and Lester Lawrence was almost taken off of his feet by the rush. That was the reason he stood back, with his hands on the derringers in his coat pockets. He did not intend to join in the rush, since that would not better the chances of Cleo a particle. It would be better for him to remain where he was, and pick his own ground if he found it necessary to go into the fight. He would be more apt to find the young lady by keeping on the outskirts; and then, he thought it was likely she would start for the hotel when she heard the general uproar. If he watched for her he might see her in time to be of some service.

It did not take long to start a preliminary skirmish, and before he could have counted a hundred there were a few scattering shots from the sides of the streets. They did not do much execution; but they served to open the ball. There was whooping and shouting enough to scare a tenderfoot of the masculine sex; and Lawrence thought that if Cleo was anywhere near the scene she would have some new ideas about the manners and customs of the wild and woolly West.

In his concern about the daughter he had not given a thought to the mother. Besides, she was safe in the house, and so needed none of his concern. So he might have thought; but while he stood carelessly leaning against the side of the doorway he heard a feminine scream from within, that he recognized. He had heard it once before that evening; or one so like it that at that distance they could not be told apart.

Mrs. DeLangdon was not a nervous woman; and he doubted if she would lose her head because there was a racket of fire-arms on the street. There must be some new development, some fresh cause for her excitement. Perhaps Cleo had come back; and was harmed, or in danger. Without another thought of the disturbance outside he turned, and dashed toward Mrs. DeLangdon's room.

He met no one on the way; and with the exception of the woman whose cry he had heard, the house seemed to be deserted. The door of Dunning's room was open, but the apartment was empty. Probably he had gone out with the rest, to see the frolic.

But, though her voice was silent, Mrs. DeLangdon, or some one else, was in the room before which the sport finally halted. He listened an instant, and could distinguish the noise of an almost silent struggle. Then there was a gurgle, like a person would make trying to utter a cry with a hand on his or her throat. He waited no longer, but flung himself again at the door.

His hand was on the latch, and he came with no light force, but the door failed to yield to his attack. The latch was raised, and if there was a bolt it was not in its socket; yet something almost as solid as a wall barred his way. He could imagine that there was a man of no slight strength standing with his back against the door.

The sport had a derringer in his hand in an instant, and was on the point of trying a shot at the panel, when it struck him that he did not know where the lady of the room was standing, and that it was as likely a chance shot would hit her as any one else. Such things generally do go to the wrong spot, though so far in his life his luck, aided by fairly good judgment, had saved him from any such blunder.

Again he hurled himself against the door; and though the panels creaked, and it seemed as though a few more such attacks must shatter it completely, it did not yield an inch.

He could imagine what was going on in the

room; and his thoughts worked very fast. There was no use to waste time here. While he was exhausting himself with these efforts the robbery or the murder of the lady would be completed. As he fell back he wheeled, and darted through the doorway of the next room, and out of the window. He went as silently as he could; and before the intruders could or did imagine what he was up to he had thrown himself through the window of Mrs. DeLangdon's apartment.

When his feet touched the floor the sport was ready for business; and there was plenty of it on hand. The ruffian who had been holding the door was still at his post; but, nearer—at the window, in fact—was the madame, struggling in the arms of an assailant, who was bent on forcing her along, though he labored at some disadvantage, since it was all that he could do to keep one broad palm over her mouth, and thus prevent the repetition of the scream which had brought Lester to the rescue.

In such a case there was no use to darken counsel by words without wisdom. Lawrence gave no warning, but struck out as hard as he knew how. He could put his fist about where he wanted it. Even if he made a mistake there would be no damage done that would be without remedy; while, shooting in such close quarters, at two struggling persons, he might make a terrible mistake through some unlucky turn or twist.

Down went the man, for the blow took him well up on the neck, and stretched him out as motionless as a log.

Then Lester turned his attention to the other fellow, who was coming at him with a rush. If the villain had not been rattled by the sudden and unexpected appearance of the sport when he was thinking only of defending the door, he might have had a chance to get in a shot while Lawrence was recovering from the force of his own blow. Fortunately, the man was intent only on using his muscle, since at the onset it had been firmly impressed on his mind that everything was to be done noiselessly. Out came his fist when he got within striking distance, but the sport was ready for it. His arm went rolling upward, and the blow glanced harmlessly to one side. Then came the return, and the man measured his length alongside of his companion.

"Good enough!" exclaimed Lawrence. "Don't be frightened, madame! The ruffians are both disposed of, and the danger is over. Take it easy; there is no more danger just at present."

But, Mrs. DeLangdon was far too much frightened to take it easy, or to even hear the advice. When the arm that had encircled her dropped away, and the way was open to the door, she did not stop to see who was on her side, but rushed screaming from the room.

CHAPTER XXII.

CAGED IN THE DARK.

THE movement of Mrs. DeLangdon disgusted the sport, for he wanted to learn from her the particulars of the affair, and from them decide what he had best do with his two prisoners. He gave a glance at the door, and another at the window. What was he to do? It was not likely that the madame would run into any fresh danger, and he had not time to follow her to see. He had struck about as hard as he knew how, but did not believe that the one man was knocked out, or that the other would stay insensible more than a minute or so longer.

"Guess I had better turn their pockets inside out, and then tie them up, neck and heels, till I can get a committee appointed to make the necessary arrangements with the nearest storekeeper for the tar and feathers. I suppose the camp would make it a hanging-matter if we let them, but I suppose the old lady will incline to the side of mercy, provided there is a good bit of punishment thrown on along with it. And, by the way, I guess the camp has excitement enough on hand to last it for a while, without troubling itself about such a little matter as this. If the rustlers haven't wakened it up, it is because the people are all dead. It might be as well to look out and see how that thing is going. And, by the way, I wonder—"

While he was thinking he was leisurely examining the pockets of the nearest ruffian. He did not get a chance to frame his wonder in words, for when his thoughts had reached that point the other fellow suddenly rose to his feet as though acted upon by a set of springs, and went out of the window like a flash.

As that was the man he had thought he hit the hardest, he had doubts about the condition of the other. Very likely he was not as insensible as he looked.

The doubt came just in the nick of time. He cast his eyes downward and saw that the hand opposite to him was stealing around toward the spot where pistols are generally carried. Whether the man had been all along shamming, or whether he made the movement with the first dawn of returning consciousness, made no difference just then. The motion meant shoot on the first opportunity, and Lawrence did not care to wait and see how soon that would come. At the

same time he did not fancy striking a man that was down.

"I don't know that I have any use for you; suppose you go out after your pard."

As he spoke he dived down, caught up the man, and flung him out of the window without the least regard for his bones.

The man struck the ground with a crash, but the next instant was on his feet. He looked up wrathfully toward the window. There he saw Lawrence, covering him with a derringer, so he waited no longer. Without offering to pull a weapon, or utter a word even of wrath, away he went, in the wake of the other, who was already some rods from the house, running toward the spot where the horsemen had gathered in a compact knot, to face the crowd that was forming.

There was a third man near, who sat on horseback, watching the window.

He intercepted the second fugitive, presenting a revolver to his head, and saying something to him in a low tone, that brought him to a halt.

He evidently had an interest in the affair, for he listened to the answer, and at the same time watched the window like a hawk. An angry exclamation came from his lips, as he, no doubt, heard the particulars of the failure. Then he drew his horse around until it faced the gang of strangers; and waving his hand to them the whole party joined him, and they all rode off together.

"That accounts for a good deal of the affair," thought Lester, as he watched them till they were out of sight.

"If I am not wide off that fellow is General Gloom. Like as not he has an idea that by this time she has succeeded in getting some information about the Swallow Tail; and he was bound to have it. The madam will begin to believe me when I tell her that it is not altogether a picnic to come West to look for hidden treasures. But I must find her, and hear what she has to say. I guess the danger is over for the present, though who would have thought that Gloom would have had the nerve to hold the town as a cover to his scheme to abduct the old lady. Or—was it the young one he was after? That's an idea, again. This matter is getting complicated, there are so many parties in the field. And I suppose the nuggets would have laid till the end of time if I had not made up my mind that if no one showed up, prompt to the hour, I would go for them on my own account."

He found Mrs. DeLangdon without difficulty, for the sounds of hysterical weeping guided him to where she crouched, behind the stove in the kitchen.

"There, there! The trouble is all over, and the fellows have run away. Don't be excited. Such little adventures are common enough out here, when one is once spotted as having a secret worth getting. You made a good fight of it, though, and it was well that you did. General Gloom was waiting outside; and if you had got fairly into his hands he would have had you off to the mountains by this time. I got there none too soon. The people will all be back in a moment, and then I can leave you safely. Before I go I want you to tell me what you can about what was done and said. Perhaps the men may have let fall something that is of importance."

Somewhat to his surprise he found that Mrs. DeLangdon was by no means as confused as she seemed. She was hysterical; but that appeared to be purely a physical matter; and between her laughter and her sobbing she told what she could of her late experience.

When she parted from Lawrence she went back to her room, and began to examine her trunk to see if anything was missing. While engaged in that she was suddenly conscious that some one else was there, and looking up saw a man standing over her with a drawn knife.

"Not a whimper!" said the man, shaking the blade in a horribly suggestive manner.

"Be decent and you will find us mild as mother's milk. Make a racket and it's your last night on earth. Where is the other one?"

She was not too frightened to understand that he was asking after her daughter; and thinking to temporize with him until she could see an opening for escape, answered him with all the coolness that she could command.

When he heard that Cleo was not only not there but that her mother did not know where she was, but was waiting to hear from a messenger she had dispatched in search of her, the fellow uttered a frightful oath and declared that she would have to go with him, while his pard waited for the return of her daughter. That was all that was said; and then the struggle commenced. She managed to utter one scream before the villain's fingers closed on her throat; and the rest of the time fought blindly. The gripe was rapidly approaching the strangulation point; and if Lucky Lester had delayed his coming but a little longer she would have succumbed.

"And oh, my dear sir! I will never prove ungrateful, nor forget the service you have rendered me this night. Crown it, now, by bringing Cleo back to me and I will bless you forever!"

"You can rely on me for doing that. Probably you did not hear the racket that was going on outside while you were struggling with your

assailants. No doubt she went out for a short stroll and heard what was coming. When the rustlers strike a town it is enough to make a man hunt a hole, and no doubt she went in somewhere to wait till the coast was clear. It is likely that she will be back shortly, without any effort on my part. Still, I will go in search of her as soon as I can leave you. It is a little strange that there should be two different parties in your room so nearly together. It would have been a joke if they had met. Did they take any thing?"

"Nothing, nothing! Do not stop to talk about that. I will tell you all about it again. Go in search of Cleo at once. I am perfectly recovered from my fright; and indeed I think that is all the harm that has been done."

She was in such earnest about it that Lester could not have hesitated if he had wanted to. Fortunately, at that moment he heard Timothy Jerkes returning, and into his hands he placed her, with a brief explanation. Then he went his way.

It was rather a delicate undertaking that Lucky Lester had in hand, and he trusted more to chance than to any particular efforts that he might make. The town was already sufficiently excited over the seemingly senseless raid, without setting it on the trail of a young lady who was dressed in male attire, or drawing particular attention to any strange boy who might be wandering around the town. He had told Cleo less than the truth the previous evening, when he spoke of the danger that she had been in, and according to the doctrine of chances, that danger was the greater the oftener it was incurred.

These things were in his mind as he was hurrying toward the Gilded Claw, having decided to make that place the point of his departure on the search. Certainly he had no idea of any danger to himself when he caught sight of a shadowy figure slinking out of sight behind a neighboring shanty.

He had no very fair view, and with his mind full of Cleo, he sprung lightly forward. The figure turned to face him; then the question that was on Lawrence's lips died away in a smothered groan, as a heavy blow fell with crushing force on the back of his head, and he sunk to the ground.

"There yer hev him, boss. Better do yer own keepin'. He looks like a mighty slippery customer frum what I seen ov him, an' that lick won't keep him asleep more ner a minnit. Ef yer say ther word I'll help yer out ov town with him—fur I guess yer don't want ter hev him layin' thar, an' ef yer had wanted him ter croak yer wouldn't hev axed me ter be so mighty perlik'lar whar I laid ther lick on."

"You have done your share of the work, and have done it well. That is enough. You have your pay in hand, and I will attend to the rest. If anything more is needed, to-morrow will be time enough to talk it over."

While he was speaking the man who had been called boss was securely knotting a stout cord around the wrists of the insensible sport, and applying a gag to his mouth, so that in case he revived he would be in no condition to give an alarm, or to offer resistance. When he had finished his work he looked up at his two allies in a way that showed he not only had no further use for them, but that he would be the better pleased the sooner they retired.

Seeing this they lingered no longer, but slunk away, after the manner of men who know better than to let their curiosity outweigh their prudence, leaving the boss alone with his victim.

Once satisfied that they were gone the man did not hesitate; but stooping, gathered up the body of the sport, and with a remarkable ease walked away.

The body rested so heavily, and so quietly, in his arms that after a little he seemed to suspect that the blow had been harder than was intended. He laid down his burden, and bending over it felt carefully, to see if there were signs of life.

Lucky Lester was hard to kill. He was still living, though the stroke that he had received would have broken the neck of many a man. There were no signs of an immediate return to consciousness, yet there could be little doubt but that he would come around all right in course of time.

"More luck than judgment about this," muttered the man as he again shouldered his load. "Good thing that I happened to take a notion to watch them a little, through the window, and better yet that I happened to strike Doss and his pard to help me out with the work till the others come. Things couldn't have fallen better to my hand. If I don't get out of him all that he knows I'll be asking the reason why in a pretty loud tone. It may be risky, but at this time of night I ought to be able to get him into the chute without any one being the wiser. If I don't I can drop him by the wayside, and try him again when the signs are right. Pity I didn't know sooner what the fellow was worth."

The signs were right, however; everything was in his favor. When Lucky Lester came to his senses he was no longer on the street, but lying in a place that looked suspiciously like a cellar, while a man in a mask, and dressed in a

rough and ragged suit, stood over him, trying to coax a few more drops of brandy down his unwilling throat.

Probably he did not recognize that much, all at once, for his head was throbbing almost to bursting, and he hardly knew whether he was dead or alive.

The man watched him narrowly for a while, until Lester made a fruitless effort to break the cords at his wrists. That was a sign that his senses had actually come back to him, and the fellow spoke accordingly:

"Thar yer are, fresh as a new-laid egg; an' no doubt, mo's'rus glad that I kim along ter pick yer up when yer war lyin' at the pint ov danger. Take it easy, an' yer will hev twice ther show ter live long, an' die happy. Kin yer onderstan' me? Ef so, shake yer head."

Lester understood, and shook his head, though after a rather feeble fashion.

"Glad ter hear it, fur I'm goin' ter hev a leetle talk with yer, an' ez I want yer ter answer ag'in, I'm goin' ter take this gag off. Yer don't want ter do ary shoutin' on that account; an' ef yer tries it on I'll put yer ter sleep once more; an' this time, p'raps, yer wouldn't wake up so soon. Reconnember. Ther fu'st loud whimper an' yer gits my boot in yer face—an' heavy. Ther' ain't no danger ov yer bein' heard anyway; but I'll be doin' it ez a matter ov principle. Sabbe!"

With the gag out of his mouth Lawrence drew a long breath, and felt more like himself again. He said nothing, however, but lay there, watching his captor by the dim light of a single dirty lantern, and wondering what was the meaning of all this.

"I kin see good sense stickin' out all over yer countenans, an' so I kin 'ford ter speak right plain at ther send-off. We are on ter ther fact thet yer are mixin' yerself inter ther affairs ov a man what war knowed ez Old Swaller Tail when he war gyratin' 'round these diggin's. Ez fur ez we know you is ther only man ez perfesses ter know whar ther mine ov ther condemned old reprobate war located an' that's what we want ter git at. Not ez we want ter rob ther widder an' orphan; but we'd like ter git thar fu'st, an' look it over. After that she, er they, kim take possession ez soon ez they want ter. Are yer goin' ter pilot us thar, er ain't yer? In course yer are in ther long run; but I mean, are yer goin' ter do it 'thout kickin'?"

"Why, you infernal old idiot!" answered Lawrence. "If I knew anything about any mines that were worth the looking after, don't you think I would have been onto them myself, long ago? All the information you can get out of me won't make a poor man happy. And when I come at you to get even for this outrage you will wish you had let me alone. Your only chance to get out of this with a whole skin is to turn me loose and then jump the camp as soon as possible. I don't know that I would take the trouble to follow you up, but if I ever get on to the fellow that hit me from behind I'll make it level as a die with him."

"Tha's yer platform, are it? Jest what I wanted ter know. Mebbe, afore yer surrounds another breakfast, you'll begin ter think thet ef yer don't know whar that mine are you wished yer did; er thet yer hedn't bin so fresh, a tryin' ter deceive that lone widder, stuffin' her with yer yarn about how you could lead her ter ther spot, an' all that. Yer needn't say another word jst now. I'm a-leavin' yer here in ther dark; an' I'll wait tell yer gits good an' hungry afore I offers ter trade with yer ag'in. Better be a-prayin' thet nothin' happens ter me while I'm gone. Ef thar does, salt won't save yer, fur ther ain't another livin' bein' knows ther way hyer. Not another word! I ain't got time ter chaff yer now, nobow. Good-by, an' out goes the light."

The action was suited to the word; before he had ceased speaking the man had blown out the light. In the darkness that followed he stole away, leaving Lucky Lester to a black solitude, and his own thoughts.

CHAPTER XXIII.

UNCLE BEDROCK TO THE RESCUE.

WHILE Lawrence was speaking to her, Mrs. DeLangdon had felt somewhat reassured; and she had seen him depart with a hopeful feeling that he would soon return with Cleo, or some good news of her.

Jerkes, however, was not so hopeful, and his style of conversation was by no means reassuring. He thought that it was a serious matter indeed, and expressed it as his opinion that the attack on the town had only been a feint for the purpose of covering up the absence of the young lady, and stopping any pursuit that might otherwise be made, until the men who really carried her off had obtained sufficient offing.

Although they did not wish any general alarm to be given until they found out what had become of the young lady, he soon had several reliable men out in search of her; and, incidentally, to see Lawrence and obtain a report of progress.

But Lawrence had disappeared as completely as had Miss DeLangdon; and when morning came the how and the whither of their vanishment was still as great a mystery as ever.

Of course, there was no use of thinking of keeping the matter quiet if any effective measures were to be taken; and so, by the time the sun was fairly up, all the inhabitants knew that a young lady guest at the Rising Sun had disappeared in what was certainly a most mysterious manner; and that a gentleman who went out to look for her had never come back.

Mrs. DeLangdon was disconsolate, but she tried to keep up a brave showing; and the fact that there was an angry impatience about the way in which she waited to hear of the missing pair is hardly to be wondered at.

Though she had at first felt an instinctive distrust of the young man, since his interview with her in regard to the finding of the mine, she had begun to consider him as her best hope, and perhaps her only one. The affair in hand was a great deal more complicated than she had supposed when she set out on her journey hither; and all the inquiries that she had guardedly made only elicited answers which would confirm her in that belief. Of course she had weighed the claims of Uncle Bedrock, and the man who looked like him; but the more she thought of them the more was she convinced that they were a pair of frauds, who were solely bent on making what they could out of her patronage, and then stealing away to some other spot to hunt for another victim for some similar game.

And yet, Cleo had expressed some sort of confidence in one of those men; and what she had really said to the tramp when she had withdrawn with him remained unknown. Once or twice the idea struck her that it would be worth while to hunt them fellows up, and see if they could not render some assistance in this emergency. They might know the meaning of the disappearance, and who would be the most likely to be concerned in it.

It was, therefore, with a feeling of satisfaction that she thought of these points, and heard the voice of Uncle Bedrock, as he approached, under convoy of Mr. Jerkes.

The landlord had no definite knowledge of how the previous interview had ended, for he had been called away before Bedrock, or more properly speaking, the Bedrocks, had departed; and he thought it was possible it would be the correct thing to allow him to speak with Mrs. DeLangdon. At the same time, he had but little confidence in fellows who dressed after their fashion, and were tramps by profession. He escorted him in, and then stood waiting to be assured if his reception was as cordial as appeared to be anticipated.

Uncle Bedrock executed his stateliest bow, and then pointed to Timothy.

"Ef yer please, mum, ez ther bizzness are ov importans' I would perfer a perivate interview. Not wishin' ter say anythin' ov disparagemint ag'in' ther landlord ov this pala'sbul caravaners-sary, his absence would be grateful ter yours trooly."

The face of Bedrock wore a solemn look, and his tones were portentous. Mrs. DeLangdon felt sure that he had news of her daughter, and possibly not of the most cheerful kind. She drew herself up like one waiting for a shock, and in a voice which betrayed the emotion she felt, sent the proprietor from the room. Then she turned to the tramp.

"Speak, and at once. I can bear anything but this suspense. What is the worst? Is Cleo still living? What must I do to save her!"

"Bless yer soul, mum, I reckon I don't sabbe. I called ter say thet, thinkin' ther matter over, prehaps me platform war missonderstood, an' thet I hed better put a new plank in it. I am willin' ter drop all menshun ov reenoomerashun, an' silently trust ter yer generosity after ther ten-shot hez bin made. An' ez it are a dry time fur corn, an' trust seems ter be an unknown co-erfishunt at Ginger Flat, I thort I might arrange fur ther loan ov a quarter. What's ther matter with ther young leddy?"

"This is beginning to be insult beyond bearing! Do you mean to say that you would intrude on me at such a time with not even the shadow of an excuse? Begone, sir!"

"Fur Cleopatry's sake, hold on!" exclaimed Bedrock. "I kin help her if anything kin be did, ef you'll tell me wot's ther matter. Solemn truth, I never heard a whimper ov anythin' bevin' gone wrong, an' I approached yer in good faith. Ef yer don't b'lieve I'm in earnest, jest try me an' see. Ole Bedrock knows ther ins an' outs, ther thicks an' ther thins, an' ef yer pin yer faith onto him, you'll find him gittin' thar every time. If not, may I never borry another quarter!"

He appeared to be so much in earnest now that Mrs. DeLangdon reconsidered her intention of calling on Timothy Jerkes, and briefly outlined the story that was convulsing the camp, and which it seemed improbable that he had not already heard.

"Lemme thunk," said the old fellow, sinking uninvited into a chair, stretching out his pudgy legs, and covering his eyes with his pudgier hands.

"This hyer news kinder knocks ther stuffin' outer things. But yer kin hope fur ther best now thet ole Bedrock are on ther trail. Evaporated, bez she? An' ther young man ez was so

free with his guns are likewise, moreover, in their same kittygory. Be they together, er ain't they? That's w'ot I'd like ter know."

"Most certainly not. My daughter was missing long before he knew of the fact. I am only afraid that he has been hurt or killed by the villains who undoubtedly carried her off."

"Don't think yer need alarm yerself about Lucky Lester gittin' hurt. He ain't that kind. W'ot I mean are, thet ef ther same parties hez 'em both in ther same coop ther young leddy'll be apt ter turn up afore long, an' ther young man alongside of her. He's that kind. Let that go, though. Ther next thing are, who would want her outen the road, er would be liab'ly ter gobble her in fur keeps? P'rinstans. Are ther a frantic loveyer, who could 'a' seen his las' an' on'y chance, an' took it? Er are ther 'ary one ez would be willin' ter give a small-sized pile ter hev her disappear?"

"Not that I know of," said the lady, now following attentively the words of the bummer.

"Shows how much yer kin be mistookin. 'Thar's Dunleigh, ez bez ther priur claim, an' would give his head ter git her, an' keep her. Then, thar are ther other feller, ez are on ther carpet, saying thet she belongs ter him, an' he'll hev her, er bust a wheel. An' thar's Gloom! A orful tender heart he hez when thar are a purty young leddy to ther front. I could see thet he war struck hard, but I didn't think he hed ther nerve ter foller ov her ter town. An' then you kin count on every man ez bez his eye torrads whar he thinks ther Swallow Tail orter be. It's a mighty bad crowd, don't yer see; an' it's all woke up jest lately ter ther fac' thet thar are noomerous coin, er bull'yun, lyin' 'round loose, an' ef they want ter git a show fur a taste they will hev ter be up an' a-doin'. Any thing ter git yer off ther trail fur awhile an' let 'em rake in ther sp'ile. Wouldn't wonder ef you war ter git a letter afore long, makin' a priposition ov some kind. But don't yer trade. Ole Uncle Bedrock are ther on'y 'honest man among 'em, an' he'll see yer through ther ripple."

Mrs. DeLangdon listened in amazement. How did this tramp know anything about Manton Dunleigh; or, again, of the man she had known as Leo Dunning? And was it true, what he said about the others who were interested in the search for the hidden fortune? Was it so that she had no reliance in this emergency but the man of rags and fatness, who beamed on her so confidentially?

She looked him over once more, to see if by any chance she was better than she had thought him at first meeting.

The result was not encouraging. The tatters were as pronounced as ever, and the polish of the previous day had vanished from his boots. The fact that he was clean shaven, and that his hair had been making an unwonted acquaintance with a brush, hardly helped his appearance. His face was redder than ever, and now had an oily simper on it that made her doubly suspicious. It seemed to her that his hands would be band ones to fall into; and that he was playing as hard as any one for the hidden hundred thousand.

All this flashed through her in a moment. In another, she swung back to the question, how did he know anything about Manton Dunleigh? She had forgotten all about him years ago; but she remembered the name well enough when she heard it. Was that fellow at the Flat, or had Bedrock mentioned his name to produce an effect? And in any case, how did the tramp know anything about him?

She could give no answers to her questions; and while she was thinking what they might be she kept silent, even when Bedrock turned inquiringly toward her.

"Yer don't seem ter hev complete confidens' in yourn trawly," he said, the whine in his voice delicately shaded with a regretful tone. "Me-thinks I hev showed enough ter satisfy a individual ov reason thet I hev held ov ther long end ov ther string, an' kin pull it ter some puppus. Ef yer don't b'lieve in Bedrock, w'ot better kin yer do?"

"Man, man! what do you want? If you know where my daughter is, and can do so, restore her to me, and trust me to do all that I can. I am only certain that you are a deeper villain than you look. If Mr. Lawrence has failed me I have no one here to look to, and I am afraid that friends anywhere will be hard to find if I fail in this search, about which you appear to know so much. Without this last legacy of my dear departed husband I have not a thousand dollars in the world; and if the evil fortune that has so long been pursuing me has kept up for the last few weeks, I doubt if I have that. It will all have gone in margins."

"Brace up, mum! Things mayn't be ez bad ez yer are suspectin'. Ef I war rich an' infloenshul, I'd offer ter loan sich a amount ez war necessary. Ez next best thing I kin offer me services, free ov charge, to the wilder ov me ole side pard, Swallow Tails. 'Pears like ez I could see thet same dear departed yit, an' be war a man ter be proud ov—a-spendin' his weary ole life a diggin in ther bowls ov ther yearth ter pervide home comforts fur ther da'rter he adored, an' ther wife he reverined. Many a time an' often he's tole me— But let

them confidences pass. I hev showed yer ther path ov danger w'ot's ter be trod by them ez would win ther treasure, an' hev tole yer that yer Uncle Bedrock are ekil ter ther occashun. Be ov heap good cheer. After ther work are done yer kin advance me ther expense; but a lucky strike at keyards hez made it possible fur me ter devote a heap ov time, an' some leetle money, in ther quest; an' 'bout farther chin-chin I fly to ther work. When yer sees me ag'in yer will change yer opinyun, an' every weary doubt 'll be removed."

With a flourish, Bedrock picked up his hat and bowed. Then he looked at her cordially as he shook his right hand with his left. After which performance he backed clumsily to the door, and vanished.

"Were his words intended for a truth, a lie, or a sarcasm, when he spoke of Horace? I felt the shot, even if it was a random one. The dear departed hardly got the credit in this life that he was entitled to; if it was all to do over again I hope it would be different. If I had gone about it properly I might have made something out of Horace DeLangdon. Pity that I did not try when he spoke of coming home, and I pushed him back into the life of labor, that was hopeless for him, whatever it may have been for others. There have been mistakes in my life as well as in his. If I could but have Cleopatra, and a remnant of the fortunes I have squandered, I think I would be willing to remedy some of those mistakes, even if it is too late to benefit him."

Mrs. DeLangdon had considerable force of character, or she would not have been able to view the departure of the man with quite so much calmness. If she gave way when a reaction came a little later it was not to be wondered at. Stranded in a strange place, where she had some natural enemies, and no friends; with her stock of money but slender, and no certainty whether any drafts she might make on the East would be honored; with her daughter missing; with the fortune she had hoped to gain melting away from her; and the realization that in spite of some successes in life she had been at times a very foolish woman; it was no wonder that she felt herself sinking into something like a stupor while waiting for the intelligence that might be dreadful beyond measure.

And the first bit, that came before long, was not encouraging. A letter was brought to the hotel by a miner who said it had been handed to him by a man who appeared to be in a great hurry, and gave him a five-dollar gold-piece to carry it to its address.

It was written in pencil, and read as follows:

"(CONFIDENTIAL.)"

"MY DEAR MADAME:—"

"I had hoped to see you, but there is no time to hold an interview. I have reason to believe that if your daughter was not actually stolen by a tramp known as Old Bedrock—the first of the two who called on you yesterday—he had something to do with the abduction. I am on the trail now. Hope for the best. The laborer will be worthy of his hire."

"Yours,

"RUFUS PRIMROSE."

CHAPTER XXIV.

LUCKY LESTER CHANGES OWNERS.

THE threat, followed by the darkness, was enough to shake the nerve of almost any man; and though Lawrence had an abiding confidence in his luck, his thoughts were serious enough, as he lay there, scarcely able to move a finger.

"The man means about what he says, I reckon; and it looks as though I was in a hole at last. I have tasted starvation in my time, and I know what it means. If there is anything that would break me in, it would be that—provided he can afford to give it time to work. I am not so certain that he can; and if he sees he is bound to lose, there is no telling what the scoundrel will try to do. Of course he knew what he was about when he left the gag out; so there is no use to yell. Perhaps, if I could get my hands loose, I might be able to do something, but from the way they feel there is not much chance that these cords will drop till somebody takes them off. As I have plenty of time, and nothing else to do, I might try, though."

There was some satisfaction in making the effort; but the result was what he suspected it would be. The knots never slipped a particle; and at the end of half an hour he was satisfied that the man knew his work too well to hope to undo it in that way. He ceased trying, and got back to his reflections again. He could understand and believe the statements made to him well enough. There were parties, as he very well knew, who were searching for the mine, and the treasure left by the man that had been known as Swallow Tail; and as he could help them, it was natural enough that some such move as this should be made by men who were both desperate and bold.

But was there any other reason for the outrage; and was Cleo in the same hands?

Might it not be that the second husband had not only an eye on him as in his way with the wife whom he had evidently determined not to let go of; but also was looking after the Swallow Tail matter, and was anxious to get what information he could furnish in that affair?

Or was it on neither account that he had been tumbled in there, neck and crop, to die, perchance, in the darkness?

Thinking of these things made him grit his teeth in an anger that he seldom felt till now; and long for a chance to learn the truth, even if it cost him his life.

After what seemed little less than eternity he heard a sound.

It was so slight that if he had not had his senses on the alert to catch the faintest noise he would have missed it altogether. Yet, he was certain that some one had opened a door and was listening at the aperture.

"Let them listen," he thought. "They will hear no prayer, nor moan, from me—not yet, at least."

But he heard no other sound; and contrary to his expectation there was no ray of light shed upon the gloom. After a little longer waiting he discovered that there was something going on that he could fear better than understand. The cell was filling with a noxious vapor.

He noticed no peculiar smell; he heard nothing; but he recognized the effects. A numbness was gradually settling upon him; his strength of both body and mind was leaving him; and he knew that it was the question of but a few moments how soon he would be unconscious.

"That is a better way than with a club," he thought, grimly. "But all the same, I believe I would prefer the club. Shall I shout? Not if I die. If the end has come I can pass in my chips, and the game is over, with the other fellows ahead. They did not want to starve me. Good-by, Cleo! Will you ever know?"

He pronounced the last sentence aloud, and then lay rigid and almost, if not quite, dead.

From the time that he first noticed the slight sound until he was stretched out with stiffening limbs was but a few minutes, though they seemed like a very long time to him before they were half gone. And hardly had he lost consciousness when the door opened in earnest, and the man who had captured him reappeared. He entered with a quick, decisive step, and at his heels followed a couple of men.

"The thing worked to a charm, and the fellow cannot move hand or foot, so that he will give no trouble, and you can handle him about as you would that much corn-meal. Take care that you don't break any bones; and look out for him when he comes to his senses. He is one of the sort that you don't want to give any advantage, or he will get the best of you in spite of fate. I suppose I ought to attend to the matter myself but I can't leave town just now. Of course, you run the risk of being seen by some one, but it is the best we can do. If any one halts you, bluff as hard as you know how; but don't fight unless you have to do it to get away. I will be with you in the morning; and to-morrow we will have it all out of him, or know the reason why."

"And s'posing the dese has bin too big fur him, and he's gone over the range for good and all. Is there any use in toting a corpus around the country, to risk running our necks into a noose? He lies mighty still and quiet."

"Don't you worry about that. He will be lively as ever by daybreak, and perhaps sooner. I know what sort of a dose I have given him; and I don't make mistakes where there is a big pile of coin at stake; and something more. Up with him, and let me see what you can do."

The order was given in a tone that was intended to put a stop to any further parley; and the men so understood it. They lifted the unfortunate Lester between them, and though at first they found it rather an awkward job, they soon got accustomed to the load, and then carried it with an ease that was good proof of their strength.

The task of conveying him from the town was not as difficult a one as might be supposed, since the vault, or cellar, that had been used as a temporary prison was on the outskirts of Ginger Flat, and by the time the men had gone a hundred yards they were lost from the view of anyone who might be in the streets of the camp; and were seeking the easiest paths by which they might make their way up the broken ground that led to the hills beyond.

Before they reached the higher ground, however, the two stopped to rest, and from what was said it was easy to see that one, at least, was not in love with his task.

"Pears to me the boss might have ordered in one of the boys on horseback, and let him have the rest of the job. The pay is fair to middling, but all the same I'd give my share to be out of this. Before we get a mile further he will weigh a ton. I tell you, it's an imposition to break a fellow's back over a bit of work like this. Half an hour more will do the up all over."

"What boss says goes, and it's not safe to have too many aches and pains over what he lays out. Better have more style about you, and keep quiet till you get to camp. It's nobody's business whether you liked the work or not; and there were half a dozen who would have been glad to take it off your hands for half the pay the boss is going to give. Spit on your

hands, and take hold again. This corpus may come to life sooner than we figure on; and by that time I want him in some one else's fingers. I have heard of him before; and I tell you, he is a bad man from 'way back, besides having the luck of the Old Boy."

"Don't fret yourself about me. I know who I am talking to; and when the wrong party is around I sing small. I was just letting out a little plain truth; and I feel like a few words more if I thought they would do any good. What makes me mad is that the chap is elected for the flume anyway, because he won't say a word to save his neck. If the boss had sent him over the range, and been done with it, it would have amounted to the same in the end, and saved me a heap of sweat and labor."

"And as you are paid for them I can't see why you should growl. Get hold if you are going to, and growl when you get to a place where it is a good deal safer than it is here."

The grumbler looked as though he was going to utter an angry retort; but he changed his mind, shut his lips firmly, and renewed his grasp on Lester Lawrence. He was in a bad humor, sure enough; but he did not seem to care to provoke his companion further, though he shot toward him an ugly glance, that it was perhaps as well for him was not seen in the darkness. Evidently, the two were not good friends.

The work was heavy enough, to be sure; for the two rested several times more during the course of their journey, which was even less than the mile of which one of them had spoken. Then they came to the spot for which they had been aiming; and at the base of a huge rock were stopped by a low-breathed challenge.

"That's Pete on the lookout. You go ahead and show him it is all right," said the grumbler, halting himself, and thus bringing both to a standstill.

"All right; but you look out that the sport don't fly away with you while I am gone. He may not be as dead as he looks. And then, you know that he has the luck of the Old Boy himself."

The words were said jestingly, but they carried the sting that was intended.

"Fly away, nothing! I'm more afraid that you'll forget to come back, and bunk in, leaving me to tote him in alone. If you do—"

The rest of the threat was left unspoken, so that the man to whom it was intended to be addressed could afford to glide away laughing. He went in the more haste because of an impatient exclamation from the "Pete" who was on the watch.

"Don't be glimflashy, old man!" he exclaimed, as he advanced to the very base of the rock, and leaning against it reached upward.

The strokes of a hammer upon the stone followed, faint but distinct. It was the regulation answer to the challenge, when haste was not requisite, and on the sounds Pete leaned over the rock, speaking in a voice that was little over a whisper.

"Knew it was you; but a fellow hez to foller orders all ther same. Bin a-lookin' fur you an' Hub for a hour. Got yer man along?"

"Hillo! That's a weary old joke on us. Told to keep our mouths shut, and speak to nobody about the job; and the first man we meet knows all about it. Yes! He is back there, restin' with Hub. And a mighty big contract it was to carry him in. If Hub hadn't begun to grumble I would have been swearing out loud! I'll go and fetch them in. The boss won't be here before daybreak."

It was only a dozen steps to where he had left the prisoner and Hub, and the man stepped away carelessly enough. When he had gone a few of them, he stumbled over what he knew by the feeling was a prostrate human body.

"Here, Hub, take hold," he said, reaching downward. "It will only take a minute more to hustle him in, and then you can go off and swear at your leisure."

There was no answer, but he was sure that he felt the body under his hands move with returning life. In addition, there was about it a certain unfamiliar feeling. In the shadow of the rock the spot was dark, too dark to see more than a dim outline; and, full of some strange suspicions, he lit a match.

The body belonged to Hub, and their prisoner was nowhere to be seen!

CHAPTER XXV.

CLEOPATRA'S TRIALS.

As has already been pretty clearly outlined, Miss Cleopatra DeLangdon was a young lady of an independent nature, and very much given to following the dictates of her own sweet will. In her younger days she had been so completely under the will of her mother, that when at last she made a fight for her freedom, and won, she intended to have all that the name implied.

At the same time, she had gained wisdom by experience, and kept her intentions to herself. Whatever she might be bent on doing that she knew her mother would not approve of, she allowed her mother to find out after, rather than before. Mrs. DeLangdon knew nothing of the original marriage with Manton Dunleigh—or Lucky Lawrence, as he was now called—and had not the remotest idea that her daughter had

any plans of her own, when she came to this far-off region.

The reticence of Lawrence had rather piqued the young lady, who was too prone to think that no one save herself had changed in the last ten years. If she had been content to wait and see what was his meaning she would have saved herself and her friends a great deal of trouble.

But, that was something she could not do, though one would have supposed that by this time she had learned the lesson. Anxious to meet Lawrence again, she donned her disguise, and sallied out in quest of him. She was aware that the adventure would have its dangers, but these she was willing to face, since she had a weapon that she knew well enough how to use; and then, she thought that she would have Lester Lawrence within calling distance if the worst came to the worst.

The way to the Gilded Claw was not unknown since she had been over the ground the previous evening; and she strolled in that direction, wondering whether she would find Lawrence there, and how she would attract his attention, and bring him out without being noticed by any one else who might suspect her sex.

If she had gone boldly in she might have fared better; but uncertain as to Lester's presence, she lingered at the door, thus attracting the very attention she was anxious to shun. Curious eyes were on her. If she had been looking about her she might have seen that she was being watched by two men, who were only half hidden by the corner of the house.

But, loud voices within attracted her attention, and recognizing the tones of old Bedrock she listened to what was going on, not daring to enter while there seemed to be such a good prospect for a general row.

After a little, Hark Havens with his capture, came struggling to the door, causing her to glide hastily away toward the two men, who were just trying to conjure up a plan to get her away from the spot without arousing her suspicions.

That gave them the chance that they were aiming at. A struggle with a boy would not attract much attention when there was a regular riot going on inside of the saloon. When she got within a yard of the corner, meantime looking back over her shoulder to be sure that no danger was following, a hand closed tightly over her mouth, she was wrenched from her feet, and before she knew what had happened, was being carried rapidly away. And then it was that one of the men gave the peculiar whistle that had attracted the notice of Lester Lawrence, and which he was unable to investigate.

Ginger Flat was a town of mysteries just now. There were plots and plotters; there were schemes that involved life and death; and there were schemes that aimed only at wealth. But the men engaged in them were all desperate, and bold to boot. Probably the men knew their ground, and that there was really little to fear from any casual spectator. As for Cleo, she was perfectly helpless in their hands, and from the instant she recognized the fact she had not a thought of resistance, while the hand over her mouth precluded the possibility of calling for assistance.

When she had been carried a few hundred yards from the Claw the men halted. The fact that Cleo had wasted no strength in useless struggles had been gratifying, and had also filled them with admiration. Though the hand was not withdrawn from her mouth, she could see that she was held in the easiest way that would preclude escape; and she was not surprised when she was addressed in what seemed intended for a kindly voice.

"Of course, mum, yer understands that we are onto yer disguise, an' know jest edzackly who you be. We hed a eye on yer las' night, frum ther minnit yer left ther Claw, an' would 'a' interdoosed ourselves then ef we hedn't bin afear'd ther galoot they call Lucky Lawrence would 'a' held over us with sixes. We war on ther lookout fur you ag'in ter-night, an' when yer dropped inter our arms, it jest saved us a heap ov trouble. Now we got yer, ov course we intends ter keep yer until all things is arranged right an' comfortable. But yer needn't think we mean ter harm yer. Ef yer will jest keep on in this hyer same level yer hez bin a-workin' on, you kin expect ter hev a pleasant time, an' git back to yer weepin' mam afore ther winter rains sets in. Will yer lissen ter reason if we talk it?"

He raised his hand a little as he spoke. It was all ready to clap down again if it looked as though Cleo was going to scream; but a smothered monosyllable that was evidently meant for yes reassured him, and he raised his hand altogether.

"That's the way I like to see it. We are on'y two misfortunate gents, ez hed ter take a job that we didn't care much about, er starve. Remember that. We wouldn't hev ruffled a hair ov yer purty head ef we could 'a' helped it; an' we wouldn't 'a' took hold, starve er no starve, ef ther gent who's givin' ther orders hedn't assured us that you war ez safe ez could be when we put yer in his hands; an' that he war on'y kerryin' out this hyer scheme fur yer own good. Now, you kin see that we mean biz. Ef yer tries ter kick, we hev ter put on ther gas, an' kerry yer. That's all ther' are about it. Wouldn't it

be jest ez well fur you ter go 'long 'thout any fuss, an' save yer feathers? It won't be fur thet yer will hev ter walk; an' after you hev seen ther other man, an' heared what he hez ter purpose, yer will know ef it's wu'th while ter doary wickin'."

Cleo's hand dropped to her pocket in search of the pistol that she had hidden there. It went quietly, but none the less was her intention deadly. Softly as this ruffian spoke he was still a ruffian and she felt justified in using any means to get out of his power. Unfortunately, she knew nothing about taking a snap-shot, without waiting to draw. Probably the idea of doing such damage to her coat lining could never have entered into her mind. Her thumb was on the hammer, but the click that it made as it went back was distinctly audible, and before her hand could move, the fellow had her by the elbow, with one hand, while with the other he presented his own revolver to her head.

"Ef I war ter pull ther trigger I don't b'lieve you could say it warn't ther kerrect thing ter do. Ov all ongrateful ones you jest take ther rag off'n ther bush. Tryin' ter pot me outen yer pocket, jest ez though yer war a bad man, with a thumpin' big record. It's no use, I reck'n. We'll hev ter wrap a rag round yer tongue, an' kerry yer ther rest ov ther way. Jest one more chance will I give yer; an' first place, Jack hed better take this hyer barker away, ez you war trying ter git me kivered with. You got it, Jack?"

"In course," responded Jack, tersely, as he twisted the weapon out of her now unresisting fingers, and dropped it into one of his own pockets.

"Wait! Say no more," said Cleo, giving up the moment that she saw it was useless to struggle against fate. "Things cannot be made worse by it, and I will follow you without a word. If you are only agents it may be worth while to see your principal. I pledge you that I have no other weapon."

"That's all right, then. Hyer goes."

With the form of the seeming youth between them, the two walked rapidly away. The men were inclined to be silent, but Cleo would have been less than a woman if she had not had her curiosity, that wanted to be gratified no matter what were the circumstances under which she was placed. Before they had gone very far she spoke, in what was little more than a subdued whisper.

"You have certainly been trying to do your spiriting gently, so that I can believe your employer is at least no ruder than yourselves. Could you not give me a hint of who he is, and why he should take this troublesome, roundabout way to obtain an interview?"

"Doubtless, doubtless. There are a heap ov things me an' Jack could do, but we ain't a-doin' 'em 'thout a good an' sufficient reason. Jest keep quiet a wee bit longer an' you kin ax him all ther questions you hev a mind to, an' we won't run no risks 'cause we war too fresh with our tongues. But, he's a awful nice-spoken man, an' I wouldn't wonder ef it would do yer a heap ov good ter hear him talk. I know it did us when he said he had a century apiece fur two sich poor shotes ez we begun ter think we be, ef we would do a leetle job that war jest ez easy ez rollin' off a log."

"Then he is a stranger to you? Were you not afraid to trust yourselves to his guidance, especially since it might get you into trouble; and if he failed to pay, you would have little recourse? Supposing I bid higher? My liberty certainly ought to be worth more to me th'n my captivity to him."

"That would 'pend on whether you arg'd with ther spot cash in yer hand like he did. Don't make no differens to us whether he wins or loses ez long ez we got our pay. But I ain't sure thet yer commersball standin' are A Number One; an' 'thout ther collat'ral in advance my pard an' me wouldn't deal. Ef ye got three hundred ter chip, show it up an' we turn ye loose."

While this guarded conversation was going on the three were still pursuing their course in the direction toward which their faces had originally turned; and as the way had seemed so lonesome there did not appear to be much chance that they were going to meet any one. If they should, whoever they came across would hardly be likely to suspect that the youth striding along so unconcernedly was a prisoner, who was willing to promise a good deal to get away from the other two.

Unfortunately, though, promises did not go down very well with them. They were free to confess that they were open to purchase, but they wanted to deal on a strictly cash basis, and that was just what Cleo could not do. And if she wanted to be strictly honest it would not do to offer too much, since she was well aware that the resources of her mother were limited; and though she had ten thousand dollars in an Eastern bank, that was subject to her check, nothing but the direst necessity would induce her to touch it. It was a trust, as she always argued with herself when she was thinking the matter over. Considering the source from which the money came she could hardly bring herself to say it was a sacred one; but the trust was there all the same. Of course, she had no

three hundred dollars in her pocket; and if she had possessed that much she would have thought twice before she would have called the attention of these men to the fact. By their own showing they were not at all particular how they got money, so that they got it.

"Ah, I see that you are not inclined to trust me. So much the worse for you; and perhaps the better for me," she said softly. "I can assure you that I would not meet your employer if I could get out of it; but it may turn out that he is the very individual I wish to see."

"That's er fact. We ain't trustin' nobody, Jack an' me. That's why we both got rich. Bein' strictly honest in all transackshuns hez give us a reputashun second ter none, an' when thar's a job to be done that's in our line they sends fur us fur miles 'round. Perhaps ther one weakniss I hev fur chin-music would be a bad thing ef it warn't thet my pard never speaks onless he's spoke to. Ther jin'ral averidge sets us solid, sence we don't talk more ner one third ez much ez ther rest of mankind, takin' 'em in couples. An' by ther way, ef we hurry you too much give us a hint, an' we will draw in on the lines. It is quite a goodish walk ter whar we are goin', an' we don't want ter play yer out a-goin' thar. Reckon you ain't used ter this style ov work, an' we must make allowance."

This was very thoughtful, for though they had been proceeding at a slow pace, and the lights of Ginger Flat were still twinkling behind them, at no great distance, yet Cleo was beginning to tire, and the suggestion that she might slacken her pace was an agreeable one.

"Talkative James is what they call me," was the way he broke in again after some distance had been passed in silence.

"It's not a fair thing ter call a body names, but I guess whar it hit nigh ter center a man has no call ter grumble when they plaster one like that on him. They call pard, there, Silent Jack. That ain't so bad ag'in. Oh, you can bet high on it that the world don't go far wrong when it makes up its mind about a man. If they monkey with his handle it is because they have the exact thing that suits him better. For instans—"

"Click! click!"

Whatever Talkative James was going to say was lost to the world forever, after those sounds fell upon his ear. They were made by the cocking of a brace of revolvers, at no great distance; and though it was not possible to see where their holder was hidden it was certain that he could not be far off. There was an immediate silence, which allowed some one else to say a word or two.

"Han's up, an' fingers empty! Hyer's yer Uncle Bedrock, with both his shooters ready ter drop ther fu'st man ez makes a move! Knuckle, blame yer, er you'll never know what it war thet hurt yer!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

NOT SO CERTAIN AS IT SEEMED.

ON recognizing that voice Cleo gave a joyful cry. She had never had a very good opinion of Uncle Bedrock, but as he was here, and apparently on her side, she was glad enough to greet him, since he came with the drop. At the same time, as she was to a certain extent under parole, she folded her arms, and beyond that first exclamation said nothing that might indicate who she was, or that the men on either side of her were, in her mind, two of as great villains as remained unbung.

Talkative James and his pard exhibited no more excitement than Cleo might have expected from what she had heard and seen of them. Up went their hands at the hail, and they stood like statues. With the drop on them, and they engaged in such a business, there was wisdom in submitting quietly. No lynch court in the world would have hesitated in justifying Bedrock for shooting them down on sight if Miss DeLangdon once told her story before it.

It was not too dark to see that the surrender had been made, and at once Bedrock added:

"That's ther kayrect move ter make. Now, you jest keep that are way until I look inter this hyer thing a leetle. 'Peared ter me thet ther' war su'thin goin' on that warn't 'cordin' ter Gunter, an' I made up me mind ter look ther matter over. You leetle 'un thar, in ther middle, step out an' sing yer leetle psalm. W'ot's ther meanin' ov all this, anyhow?"

"When you say that, have you got the drop on me? are you thoroughly in earnest that I must talk?" asked Cleo, anxious to preserve the letter of her contract; but only too willing to tell her story, if it was only to a tramp.

"You jest bet thet's my platform, an' I want ter hear yer warble right off ther han'le, 'bout ary foolishness. Ef yer uncle hez bin drawed inter a wile-goose chaso, he wants ter git ther p'int ov ther game, an' then draw out. But he reckons that he warn't mistaken when he took ther trail. Speak up, leetle one. Yer sha'n't be hurt ef yer do; but you'll git a 'tarnal sickness ef yer don't."

The invitation was what she had asked for; and yet, when it came, she was not as certain that she wanted to talk as she had been. It began to dawn upon her that there was considerable explaining to be done to account for her

being found in that garb, and Uncle Bedrock was hardly the man she wanted for a father confessor. So far, he had not seemed to recognize her voice; but it was a question whether he would have clipped in to the rescue of an ordinary boy, or that he would have moved a step if he had not thought there was money to be made out of it.

"I'm a-waitin'," said the tramp, gravely, after a moment's pause. "These hyer galeots will git tired a-boldin' the'r han's up, an' it may make a case ov manslaughter in ther tenth degree, positive case, ef yer fingers longer."

"After all," answered Cleo, "there is not so much to tell, since you seem to have been looking on. These fellows made me their prisoner; and through fear of worse treatment I have been following them, I know not whither. You have come to my rescue. Good! Take me back in safety to the town, and you shall be well rewarded."

"Ov all howlin' liars, ef he don't take ther cake!" gasped Talkative James. "You could see fur yerself that he war a-going alng ez social ez yer please, an' it war ez war foller-in', fur he drawed us right on with a yarn about a discovery he'd made, an' how he wanted a couple ov stout, likely lookin' men, like me an' my pard, ter help him work it. Why ter hear him talk jest made a man feel rich all over. Ef thar's anything wrong about ther boy it ain't our fault, an' ef you jest say ther word we'll leave him right hyer in your hands, an' mosey back ter town. After sich a whaler ez that, me an' my pard, we don't want no more ter do with him."

"Ez I don't keer ter cut yer throats on sich contradictionary everdence I reckon thet would be ther best I could do. S'posin' yer containners ter keep yer digitals elevated, an' start. Turn yer faces to'rards Ginger Flat, an' don't look ther right hand er ther left. An' you, kid, stay whar yer are tell they git outen sight. This hyer picnic wants a leetle talkin' over, all by our two selves alone. I tell yer, thar's a heap sight ov danger ter onperfected females; an' thar's no tellin' what might 'a' happened ef yer uncle hedn't dawned in when ther weather war sultry, an' thar war thunder in ther air. Jest look at 'em travel! They know how ter pull out when ther gran'pop sez, scat!"

It was a little remarkable, the time the two hard cases made, the moment they had old Bedrock's order to "git!" They never stopped to say good-by; or waited for Bedrock to finish his sentences. When he told them to turn their faces toward the Flat they did so, and then began at once to travel. While Bedrock was chuckling over the way of their going they vanished from sight.

After a wait of a few minutes Miss DeLangdon began to think it was time for them to be following in about the same direction. When she hinted as much, she was met by a response that was absolutely stunning.

"Time ernuf afore us, leetle one; time ernuf! You don't seem prezactly fitted ter take keer ov yerself, an' that mother ov yourn are about ov ther same specie, but slightly different. You o'r't ter hev a guardeean, an' I war thinkin' ov applyin' fur ther posishun. How does that strike yer? How'd yer like ter come under ther wing ov old Bedrock fur a wile, tell ther storm blows over? I tell yer, these hyer be dang'rous times, an' will be tell this hyer trouble about ther Swaller Tail are straightened out some-ways."

The coolness of the proposition was something of a shock to Cleo. It sounded as though her troubles were not all over yet. The two men from whom she had been rescued were about on a par with her rescuer, in looks and language; and as far as they themselves were concerned, she would almost as soon have trusted them as this old fellow, who had the manners of the tramp, but the shrewdness of a Philadelphia lawyer, if she had not been greatly mistaken in her readings of the lines in his fat, yet foxy face.

She had no answer ready for him, and remained silent, while he went on:

"I dunno w'ot argyments them chaps used ter convince yer thet yer best hold war ter foler them, but w'otever they war, jest consider me a-usin' 'em, with a heap sight more earnest in ev'ry word ez I sez. I kin tell yer thet as it are they haven't bin ther w'ust fr'end's yer hev bed in ther world, fur they hev bin bevin' a interestin' time in ther camp sence you bin gone; an' it's jest ez well thet you wern't thar. I kinder allow thet ther danger ain't all over yit, an' so ther best we kin do are ter retire ter a place ov safety tell ther storm don't rage quite so much, an' thar's sunshine overhead."

"It seems to me," said Cleo, gathering a little courage, "that you are talking very much in the same line that they did, and that my exchange has not benefited me a particle. In fact, I am worse off than before, since they were the agents of some one who was presumably of a little better grade, at least; while you are, if anything, worse. If you have a due regard for the safety of your neck, you will guide me at once to the town. I refuse to listen to your maunderings, and if there is danger there, I would at least not be alone to meet it."

"F'milyerarity breeds contempt, an' those are

ther matter in these case. Yer hev seen old Bedrock on ther road, an' took ther fancy thet he don't know 'nuff ter go in when it rains. Hev it ez yer chooses—so yer follers ther dictates ov me royal will. Yer sees this hyer cord, an' this hyer knife? I won't argy ther case, but if yer don't want ter do ez I sez, then take yer ch'ice. I'll hev ter use ther one er ther other. It's ther las' time ov askin'. Are yer ready ter perceed, er must I hev recourse ter violen's? Take yer time fer ther ans'r, but give it mighty quick."

There could be no doubt about the earnestness of the fellow; though under other circumstances Cleo would have laughed at the gravity with which he produced the knife and cord. There was the element of the ludicrous in it, in spite of the fact that she did not doubt he would be willing to use either if she did not go with him. She made one last effort to delay, if not escape, the uncertain fate that he seemed to have in reserve for her.

"It must be money that you want. I can promise you fair ransom. Name what you expect to demand for my release, and if it is within the compass of my purse or my bank account you shall have it when I am again safe under the roof of the Rising Sun. And I can promise you an extra gratuity if you can bring me there without my absence having been noted."

"You seem ter hev a wuss opinyun ov me than I hev ov meself—which are sayin' a heap. Jest sot it down thet it's not money I'm wantin'. Hev oceans ov it—more ner I know w'ot ter do with. I jest want ter perfect yer frum ther roarin' lions w'ot are ragin' 'round ther Flat, an' ter do that I'll hev ter hide yer in me summer resort tell ther wild beasts are tamed, or put in a cage. I'm yer solid frien', an' that's all thar are ov it. Now, come on!"

He laid one finger on her shoulder, as lightly as though she was of spun glass and he feared she might break. But, that finger felt as heavy as a whole hand of steel. When he as carefully raised the knife, and held it before her eyes, so that the moonbeams shimmered on the blade, and then delicately drew the edge through the air at the distance of but an inch or two from her throat, she shuddered, and then gave up, for the present. She was certain that he meant what he said; and so long as he kept up the display of fatherly kindness with which he was starting out, she thought it might be as well to avoid precipitating the catastrophe which evidently was so strongly threatened.

"You promise me that you mean me no harm?"

The question was asked firmly, and as though she believed the answer would be one that could be relied on. His reply was given in just as good faith:

"'Pon me honor an' word. Ther man er woman ez ever tied ter Bedrock never hed him ter go back on 'em ez long ez they war equar' with him."

"Then, lead the way. I will trust you because I can do nothing else."

"Thet's ez good ez wheat. You are doin' yer uncle proud; an' he'll return ther complerment er bu'st a wheel."

Though worried, perplexed, troubled and frightened, Cleo never lost her coolness. She followed the old fellow, indeed, with a heart that was every moment growing stouter. When they had passed over the range of hills toward which he had at first directed their course, they came to a trail that was quite clearly defined, and just when she was beginning to feel that she was too tired to walk a step further she heard a sound in front of her, that evidently fell upon Bedrock's ears at the same moment. He touched her on the shoulder, and halted, as he whispered:

"Kin me ears derceive me, er do I hear ther stompin' ov hosses? Perovidens hez tempered ther wind ter ther shorn lam'. W'ot are this I see afore me?"

It was a strange chance, if chance it was. There were two horses tethered by the roadside; though sign of owners there was none.

The halt was but momentary. Then Bedrock, still with a firm bold on the wrist of his prisoner, moved cautiously forward. The coast was clear, no one was near. Without the least hesitation he placed Cleo upon one of the horses, attaching its halter to the saddle of the other, which he mounted. Then the two rode away.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE GUARDIAN OF THE MINE.

CLEOPATRA was a brave young lady, and a cool one, but it cannot be denied that she accompanied her captor with the gravest misgivings, and that if she had seen any way of escape she would have essayed it, desperate though the hope might have been.

The two horses were fastened together, so that there was no chance to test their speed in a race; and for her to throw herself down, and attempt to escape on foot, with the certainty against her of being caught, appeared to be a ridiculous folly. If she was to get away from Bedrock this was not the time to

try it. So she rode on with as brave a front as she could assume, all the time inwardly vowing that when the chance came she would kill the fellow out of hand sooner than fail to get away from him.

It was well for her that she was not compelled to make the journey on foot. The ground over which she passed was rough and broken, and even the sure-footed mustang under her, accustomed as it was to mountain climbing, went but slowly for the most of the way. After they had once left the trail on which they had found the horses Bedrock picked his way cautiously enough, and it was at times a wonder to Cleo that he found it at all. At any rate, he kept moving, whether he was on the right track or not; and as he seemed satisfied with his progress he must have been doing as well as he expected.

Once or twice she tried to question him as to their destination, but he, generally so talkative, had become silent and he answered her briefly, though not unkindly. The one important word in his response, however, was, "wait." The change in him was not unnoticed, nor was it particularly acceptable to the young lady, who would sooner have had even his oily flow of vain words to listen to than to endure silence.

At length, just when Cleo was deciding that they would be compelled to halt from lack of ability to proceed through the solid wall of mountain that lay athwart their path, they turned the sharply jutting angle of a rock, and she could see through what looked like a narrow hallway, the feeble flashing of a faint fire.

"Guess you ain't sorry ter see thet ther journey are almost done. Hyer we be, jest about at home. Yander's ther fire, an' I wouldn't wonder ef Jack hed a cup ov coffee a-b'ilin', an' James war a-settin' ov ther table. It's rayther a late hour ov ther night fur a supper, an' sorter early in ther mornin' fur breakfast; but suthin' ter stay ther in'nards would come like a reverlashum. Jest a minnit longer, leetle one, an' we'll be at home."

Whatever he might mean by home, the knowledge that her journey was about completed was gratifying to the young lady, who was ready to drop with fatigue. When Bedrock drew up she slid off of the horse, and staggered feebly toward the fire. The wonder to her was that she had not given out long before. There was no thought of escape in her mind now. Even if the chance was to present itself she was too exhausted to take advantage of it.

She had hardly noticed the words of the tramp, but they had given her the idea that there were some friends or accomplices of his at this lonesome camp; so that she was not surprised to see the forms that were hovering near the fire. Two men were there, who looked up at her as she came near, and nodded, but said nothing, until Bedrock, who had been staking out the horses, approached.

Then there was a bit of conversation which Cleo heard with amazement, when she fairly recognized the voice of the fellow who answered the salutation of Bedrock. That voice was strangely familiar, and by the time she had heard its owner speak a dozen words she recognized him as none other than Talkative James! Her capture from that individual and his partner, Silent Jack, had been all a sham. Bedrock was the employer to whom they had so mysteriously alluded; and the scene had probably been rehearsed beforehand.

What of it? Her indignation could not have been any deeper than it already was; and the cup of coffee was not the less grateful because it was presented to her by the hand of Silent Jack. It gave her new strength, and she felt her courage rising to the occasion as Bedrock turned toward her, his mouth full of bread and cold meat, and a tin cup of the beverage in his hand.

"If yer hez any occashun, ther cupboard are afore yer ter help yerself ouden, an' yer kin go fur it 'thout fu'ther askin'. It's quite a while tell mornin', an' mebbe you will hev some trouble gettin' asleep ef yer don't stay yer innards! But ef yer perfers ter retire, thar's yer bed, an' I don't reckon thet you kin find a better one this side ov Ginger Flat. I'll guarantee thet you kin sleep ez safe thar ez ef yer war in ther best bedroom

ov ther Risin' Sun; an' I would advise thet yer don't let ary time go ter waste. Ef yer don't want no vittals yer had better crawl in, imme'jut."

He pointed as he spoke; and Cleo saw the couch to which he alluded. It did not look very inviting, but she was woefully tired. Whatever she might want to do, the first thing was to gain strength; and sleep was the most efficient thing to restore that. Without any questions she threw herself down; and was asleep much sooner than either he or she could have thought possible.

It seemed to her that she had been sleeping but a short time when she awoke, to hear a muttered conversation, and to distinguish the three figures standing over the camp-fire, talking to each other in a low tone while they watched the breakfast that was being prepared in rather a primitive way. She turned uneasily on her couch, and the noise she made, slight though it was, attracted the attention of the central figure, which belonged to old Bedrock. He left the fire, and came to her side.

"Glad ter see yer awake an' movin'. Didn't want ter sp'ile yer nap; but ez I war leavin' temp'rarily, wanted ter say afore I left thet you kin rest easy. Ye'r safe hyer, an' ef ther 'commodashuns are not up to ther av'ridge, a leetle roughin' it will do yer good. You kin hev breakfast now, er later on. Jest order things 'round ter suit yerself. I'm goin' in ter Ginger ter see ef yer mother are safe, an' ter ease her mind by a intervoo. When I gits back I may be able ter explain w'ot I hev in me mind. It are s'kassly necessary ter interdooce yer to thar gents ov ther guard, ez they hev a ready interdooced the'r-selves; but you kin count on the'r bein' safe men ter trust yer with."

"It is not likely that I will have occasion to speak to them, so that any reference to them is entirely unnecessary," answered Cleo.

"But if you are in earnest in what you say, and really intend to see my mother, pray give her my love, and assure her ef my safety up to the present time. And urge her in my name to make all the haste she can to arrange for my return to the town. It may be dangerous there; but it is death to stay here."

"Sorry ter hear yer are so onsatisfied with ther 'commodashuns ov ther Hotel de Camp-out. It's big ernuf fur most ary body, an' it hez its 'vantages in ther way ov ventillashun, fire escape, an' ther like, thet are onsurpassed. An' fur diet—bacon an' hard-tack kin go ez fur, an' keep ther speerits up ez high, ez ary fodder I know ov. I'll speak to ther madame however; an' ef she will trust ter Uncle Bedrock I think I kin 'range things all 'round, ter suit."

"And if the madame does not fall in with your proposals, supposing you speak a word or so to the gentleman known as Lester Lawrence."

"Otherwise, Manton Dunleigh," said the tramp with a twinkle in his eye.

"No doubt that would suit yer a heap sight better than ter pin yer trust on yer mother. But I am 'feared thet he would be onreasonable, an' 'clined ter shoot; 'thout stoppin' ter menshun thet I opine he hez troubles ov his own ter conquer. So long. I'll give yer love to all equirin' frien's, an' be back with news to'rads evenin'."

It was useless to attempt to reason with the tramp; and all the consolation she had was that as long as there was a prospect for money in the future the gang would keep her safely so that when the trade was made they could deliver their goods in good condition. Bedrock went on his way, and Cleo was left to the guardianship of his allies.

They did not appear at all anxious over their trust. They ate their breakfast, setting back the pan, and kettle that contained the bacon and coffee, so that they would be kept warm for Cleo whenever she might be willing to call them into service; and then lounged alongside of the fire, lazily smoking their pipes. Their backs were toward her, and really, it seemed to her that if she only knew in which direction to turn she might succeed in stealing away without attracting their attention. If she had only eaten her breakfast she thought that perhaps it would be worth while to make the effort; but as there was no telling how long she would have to wander if she once swung adrift in these wilds, and the commissary resources were practically nothing, she was wise enough to

understand that her strength would soon be exhausted, and she might find herself in a worse plight than she was in at present. The fatigue of the previous night, and the fresh mountain air, had given her a ravenous appetite, now that she had turned her thoughts to the subject, and in spite of the coarseness of the provisions in the larder she decided to gratify it.

When she put it to the test she found that hard tack and bacon were not to be despised; and she was somewhat ashamed of herself when she noted the grin on the features of Talkative James, who waited on her, and watched the gusto with which she eat.

James did not talk as freely as he had done the previous evening; for which she was thankful. Until she had formulated her plans she did not care to say too much to these gentlemen. She preferred to keep them at a distance. She went back to her couch and busied herself with her own thoughts.

It was still early in the morning, for Bedrock had taken his departure almost at day-break. The hours went along with leaden slowness; that was as wearisome to the two men as it was to her. When she arose, and walked about, she could see that they occasionally cast a glance in her direction; but they gave her no cautions, and evinced no fear of her attempting to escape. Finally, as the day wore on, she began to anticipate the return of Bedrock, and to speculate on the result of the interview he had declared he was going to have with her mother.

In the midst of her thoughts she was aroused by a shout, that caused her to spring to her feet in alarm, and look toward the two guards, who at this particular moment were seated a dozen yards away, thumbing a pack of cards, out of which they were trying to pick an interesting game of seven-up. She turned her head so quickly that she was in time to see a figure, that looked something like a ball, drop from the bowlder at the base of which they were sitting, directly upon the back of Talkative James, crushing him to the earth. Then the ball bounded into the air, and dropped upon Silent Jack. He, too, went down. By that time James was struggling toward his feet, and his hand fumbling at his hip, in search of a weapon; and the ball kept on bounding, paying its attention once more to him. So it went, and for a time the fight was desperate, though Cleo did not linger to watch it. She caught one glimpse of the assailant's face and figure, and recognized him as the dwarf, Isaac, who had accosted her when, in company with Lucky Lester, she was strolling beyond the confines of the town. She had decided that he was a dangerous madman then, and now she did not care to meet him; to say nothing of the fact that if she intended to make her escape, now was her chance. Without waiting to see who came out victorious in the bitter struggle, she turned from the there men and ran away.

Something that looked like an occasionally used path by chance received her steps, and along this she darted with a speed that surprised her while she fled. Where it led to she did not stop to consider; and when she heard the voice of Bedrock calling to her she only ran the faster.

The path led into a clump of bushes, and as she looked over her shoulder she could see no one behind her, though she could hear footsteps coming in her direction. She had an idea that it would be better to hide than continue her flight, and looked around to see if there was a place near that offered a chance for concealment.

A few steps more, and a turn of the path led her to what was evidently the cause of its existence. Before her there was an opening in the ground, and even her unpracticed eye told her that it was the mouth of an abandoned shaft.

If it was deep enough, and extensive enough, it might offer her the harbor for which she was searching. She was almost out of breath; and Bedrock was near.

Another glance. The opening was at her feet, and a coiled rope lay at its side. The rope did not seem to be long, and appeared to be fastened at one end. She doubted not that by its aid she could scramble down. Without further thought she stooped, took hold of the cord, and swinging herself over the brink, began the descent.

The distance she had to go was only a few yards, and then her feet touched the solid ground. At that moment Bedrock halted at the side of the shaft, and as he looked downward the rope slid from its fastening, and dropped into the hole.

He uttered an exclamation of disgust, and as he did so felt a set of fingers tearing at his neck, as though they were the claws of a mad wild-cat, while the voice of Isaac, the dwarf, arose on the air.

Bedrock, taken by surprise, made as good a fight as he knew how, but the chances were against him.

He tried to twist around so as to secure a grip of his assailant; but Isaac shifted with him, and retained his advantage, while he shouted in the ear of the tramp:

"Five years, ha, ha! And after all this waiting to lose at last! Never! Who shall rob Isaac of the mine, and its hidden cache? Not you, villain that you are. Down, down to your death, and remember that it was Isaac who sent you!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE "DEACON" IS FOUND.

WITH a maniacal strength that was little short of miraculous, Isaac sent his fingers deeper into the fat neck beneath them; and then, as Bedrock gave a gurgling groan-shifted his grasp; caught the tramp by hip and shoulder, and hurled him into the open mouth of the yawning shaft.

Hardly had Bedrock disappeared when a startled look came into the face of the dwarf. He leaned over the edge of the shaft, and peering downward, listened attentively for a few moments.

No sound came up from the depths, and after a little he turned away, passing over his forehead his right hand, after the manner of a man who has been bewildered by something, he knows not what.

"Isaac has sworn," he muttered. "He is so near to the wealth! They shall not rob him. He knew there was a thief on the trail, and if he has killed the wrong man he cannot help it. Better so than to let the treasure go. Would it not all have been his, if they had not wheedled him out of his rights, and then laughed at him? Yet the time is so nearly up; a few days and the lease will be over. Then, all that he finds in the mine will be his. Yet I wish I knew better what it is that I have done. Shall I go down and see? No. He must run his chances, and I will run mine. I will go back to the other man. Perhaps I can save his life. If I do will not that make it all even?"

Isaac was pretty certainly crazy, so that it was perhaps just as well that he did not descend. What notion might have struck his addled brain had he come across some one in the darkness of the shaft it is hard to say.

Once started in flight, and Cleo lost much of the coolness with which she had been accepting the situation. When she swung herself downward she had but one thought, and that was to elude present pursuit, and get away from both Bedrock and the dwarf. Had the rope made a larger coil, she might have hesitated to trust herself to the shaft; but it seemed likely that the distance down was only a few feet, and that, even without the aid of the cord, she might be able to scramble safely down.

She was not altogether mistaken in her calculations, for she reached the bottom of the shaft without any difficulty, beyond the strain on her hands, which were not used to that sort of work.

Nor was the darkness at all intense; and she saw that she faced a tunnel that led away from the shallow shaft. Above her sounded the step of Bedrock, and without waiting to consider whither she was going, she darted away, clutching still in her fingers the end of the rope by which she had descended. She hardly noted that it had been disengaged from above, and she probably retained it only by instinct.

When she had taken a few steps she did halt for an instant; but the noise of the brief conflict, followed by the fall of Bedrock, came to her ears, and again she hurried away, touching lightly the side of the tunnel as she went, and uncertain what would be found before her.

From the circumstance of its having been long since abandoned, she did not believe

that the working was very extensive; and before she had gone far she began to advance with more caution.

It was well that she did so. When her pace was reduced to a shuffling walk, in which she felt the ground with her feet before she set them firmly down, she suddenly discovered that there was a chasm yawning before her.

At least, when she thrust out her foot it failed to find a resting-place; and when she started back with a slight cry of alarm, she heard in answer, from below, a deep groan, that sounded horribly distinct.

She listened with every nerve thrilling, though as free from superstitious fears as any one living. In the darkness, that groan, coming so unexpectedly, was enough to make a bold man shiver. She crouched, trembling. She could not go forward; and it would not do to go back. This was surely the hiding-place that she had been thinking of; but what was the meaning of that groan?

After a little the sound was repeated; and then was followed by a voice, so weakly speaking that the words scarcely reached her eager ears.

"In heaven's name, if you are a living human being, help me. I am badly hurt, and am dying here in this dark hole. Help me out and I will reward you as well as you could ask, if it takes the last cent I have. I am rich, too. If I had never had a dollar I could never have been tempted hither. I wanted to double it all; and now I would give what I had to be out of this. Answer! Is there any one there?"

The speaker talked as though he might be in pain of both body and mind; and with what was probably a wall of rock between them, Cleo did not think there could be much to fear. She leaned forward as well as she dared, and answered softly:

"If I can help you I will; but who are you? What are you doing there; and for that matter where are you? I have found my way here by chance, and am perhaps in as much danger as you are."

"Ah, it is a human being, then. I was afraid that my ears had deceived me; or that I was the fool of my imagination. And, if I am not wrong you are a woman. I know you will not desert me. Even a companion is something to one who has been tortured in the dark. But if you will try I am sure that you can help me. I am hurt; but not so badly that I cannot do something to aid if you will try and get me out."

"No, I will not desert you; but I dare not speak loud, since there are men in pursuit who, if they saw me make my way into the mine that I am sure this is, would follow. Indeed, I am not certain but that one of them did attempt it, and had a fall for his pains. His corpse may now be lying in the shaft. What can I do for you? How deep is the shaft in which you seem to be? What is the ground like around its mouth? I am here in the dark, and almost fell into the opening."

"It is not deep. I know, because I have been here with a torch, and explored the ground. Move carefully to the left, and you will find part of the frame-work of the old curb. It is strong enough to hold twenty times your weight, and if you can reach it you can hold on to it and have no fear of falling. If you only had a rope!"

"I have a rope, that is no doubt long enough to reach you, but I am not sure that I dare help you out. You may be as desperate a man as those from whom I fled. Who are you? How did you get there?"

"You need not fear me. Angel never came so welcome to mortal man as you have done. It has been my own folly that brought me here. I trusted to a wicked man, and was deceived, as I should have expected. I brought him here to show him this mine, in which we thought we might find a treasure. When we discovered no trace of it he said that I had been deceiving him; that I knew where the treasure was to be found; and that he believed he could make the discovery without me. So he threw himself on me, and while I was insensible he must have let me down into this pit, and then gone away, leaving me here to die. It serves me right for being found in such company. It is the first time that I ever attempted to betray a trust, and this is the result."

"And your name?" persisted Cleo.

"Where did you come from?"

"My name is Jones. In Ginger Flat they call me the 'deacon,' half in sport, and the rest in sober earnest. If you are afraid to trust me, try to make your way to the town, and tell them at my store where I am. What is a man's reputation to him when his life is at stake? There will be plenty to come to save me, once they know the fix I am in."

"It is enough. I can believe you, because I know that you are a missing man. I have been at your place, inquiring for you. You may not be much better off when you get up here; but if, as you say, you still have strength enough to climb, and I can find that curb, I think we can manage it. Wait in patience until I can feel around, and make sure."

On her hands and knees Cleo moved cautiously to the side indicated, and found the curb, which seemed secure enough. Very carefully she knotted her rope, and then let the end down over the edge of the shaft. It had hardly had time to reach the bottom of the pit when it was grasped by the man below.

The rest was easy. The man was not so much enfeebled as to be unable to climb; and after a little struggling he stood on the rock beside her.

"There," he said, drawing a long breath. "I am twice the man that I was, since I am no longer alone. There is a way out if we can find it, even if the shaft by which you entered is closed. But first, we must take a little observation, and be careful about the doing of it. I want to know what has become of that man you said was following you. This way! I will go first, and you can keep your hand on my coat. There is positively no danger. I have been through here more than once with a torch, and know the ground exactly."

He felt that she was trembling, and spoke in a reassuring way. For the present he did not overwhelm her with his thanks, but she could understand the gratitude that was in his tone.

Now that they had turned, and were walking the other way, they could see the light that came down the open shaft beyond, and after a little, make out the ground that lay below it.

There was no sign of any body lying there, and Cleo began to think that Bedrock had either escaped unharmed, or that some one had carried him away. At any rate, he was gone, and that was about all that could be said.

"Humph!" said Jones, who was looking eagerly around; "it looks as though we might be in for it after all. If there is another drift, and an incline to the upper world, the way to it seems to be shut up. Was that all a dream; or are my eyes failing me? Look and see if you can see anything that looks like a joint or a seam. If we cannot find it we are lost at last."

CHAPTER XXIX.

GENERAL GLOOM PLAYS THE LIMIT.

OF the two, Cleo was the cooler. Though she had been a prisoner for some time, and had been haunted by fears as to her future, she had been above ground, and never alone. His confinement in the darkness, with a probability of starving to death before many days, had broken his nerve more than he knew, bravely as he had tried to carry himself. Had it not been for a pool of water that he had found in his gropings he would probably have given up entirely, and died off-hand before Cleo came to him. The young lady could understand this, and now that they were no longer in the dark she could think a little for both.

"It may be as well to look around for that passage you are thinking of; but even if we found it there would be no hurry about using it. It is safer here for the present than it would be above. I have no doubt that the men from whom I escaped are every bit as desperate as the one who left you in what he thought was your death dungeon. It is likely that they did not see me drop in here after all; and are searching elsewhere. After a little they may go away; but just now they cannot be far off. If we got out they would be apt to get on our trail, while here we seem to be safe. If they had any idea that I was in the shaft no doubt they would have been searching it before now."

"But you said something about one of them falling in, did you not? I see no sign of him. Where has he gone to?"

"I was frightened, and likely as not made a mistake. If not, he has either found a way out; or his companions came to his aid. As there were three to one, the contest could hardly have been doubtful, after the first surprise was over; but whichever way it turned out, the one side would be as much to be dreaded as the other. I would sooner wait an hour than make a premature attempt, and fall into their hands again."

"You are right, though I cannot as well afford to wait as can you. I have been without food for days, and now that the excitement is dying out I will be growing weaker every moment."

"Ah, I had forgotten. I can help you perhaps as much as it is good for you. Fortunately I slipped aside a little of my breakfast, to be prepared for any emergency. It is only a biscuit and a bit of cold meat, but it may be as good as a feast just now."

It was better than a feast. Cleo was cautious; and handed the deacon a bit at a time, so that the slender meal went a good ways. When he had devoured it to the last shred and crumb he professed to feel much stronger, and began to ask some questions about the woman who had been his salvation.

Cleo, being disgusted with the mine, miners, and the wealth of mines, was inclined to treat him confidentially, and told her story, briefly, yet in full.

"Strange!" said the deacon, when she had finished.

"You—one of the parties whom I would have wronged—have saved my life. It may have been for the best, after all. So you are the daughter of the man known as Old Swallow Tail?"

"I suppose that I am, though until we arrived at the town of Ginger Flat I never heard the name. And you knew him, if I am not mistaken! Mother depended upon you for intelligence that would enable her to find the treasure which she believed was buried by my father."

"She was not wrong in that belief. He left with me a letter, to be given to your mother in case she called for it within five years from the date of it. It was that letter which got me into this trouble; and it is through that letter that I will be able to reward you. If you can find the mine, the letter will point out where the treasure is hidden."

"Then you still have it in your keeping?"

The face of the man fell a little, as he answered:

"I guess the letter is missing, but I have it in my mind so thoroughly that I can reproduce it word for word, and letter for letter. This was the exact way that it ran."

Without hesitation he repeated it, as it has already been given.

"Enough. Though I had begun to loathe the very thought of the hidden treasure, and believe that it was an ignis-fatuus, for the sake of my mother I am glad that there is a chance of finding it. We know the person who can point out the mine—if this is not it—and he has promised his aid."

"I hope he will be able to do so; but in this country promises take the place of pie-crust, and are religiously broken. There are plenty of men who would say that they could point out the spots over which Swallow Tail prospected, or find the very shafts that he sunk; but when it comes to doing it they may be found wanting. What is the name of the man, if it is no secret?"

"Lester Lawrence."

"Ah, then you have found the man who will be able to aid you indeed. He was more deeply in the confidence of the old fellow than any other man I know of; and I have reason to know that he was expected to help your mother in case she ever made a search for the spot. But with a man like Hark Havens in possession of half the secret, and hot on the chase, the sooner you find your friend and get him to point out the mine, the better it will be."

"I can understand that. And the sooner thereafter we get back to some point in civilization where there is some protection for a defenseless woman, who is supposed to have a little wealth, the more likelihood there

will be of living to enjoy the treasure when it is found. And now, one question more. The name by which my father was known in this region came to me as both a shock and a surprise. I had heard but little of him, for he left us in my infancy, and never returned from the West, though he provided us with all the comforts that wealth could buy; and left us a fortune at the time of his supposed death. But from what I have lately learned he seems to have lived for years after his bequest was received; and now, I am not certain that there is any evidence of his death at all. Could he still be living?"

"The very question Hark and I mooted the other day, shortly before he dropped me into the dump. There was a report that he had gone over the range, somewhere to the South of this; but I never saw the man who was by when he passed in his checks, or had any other reason to believe that he had done so beyond that rumor. He may be living, or he may not. But no man has ever seen him here since he left, something like five years ago. I don't think I would go into the question for the present. Get the wealth first; and then you can hire a man to hunt for him if you want to; but I have an idea that as long as he wants to keep out of sight there is not much use to bother about finding him."

"What, then, was he like? I had formed my ideals; but since I have heard him spoken of as Old Swallow Tail I confess they have been pretty well shattered."

"As the man was your father perhaps I had best not say too much about him. He was a queer one. That is about all the description it is worth while to give. He used to wear a dress suit when he came to the town near which he happened to be prospecting, or located; and he sometimes put on all the style you can imagine. Sometimes, too, he was about as tough a looking character as you would care to meet. I don't know that I ever saw him drunk; but he could surround as large a portion of benzine, when he took the notion, as the next man. He seemed to be at war with himself, and never sure how he wanted the fight to end. Altogether, I should say, that you hardly look like the daughter of the man, though the West does roughen up a man wonderfully if he stays well out on the front, and makes no visits to where they do things differently."

After all, Jones spoke frankly, and it was just as well. Cleo had begun to anticipate some such disclosures, and was not as much shocked as she would have been before this journey had been undertaken. And what she heard was sufficient. She did not care to ask more questions, and began to think it was time to turn their attention to getting out of their present predicament.

"It may seem as though I only dreamed it, but I am sure that there should be another way out of this scrape," said the deacon, again looking carefully around him.

"I could have sworn that there was an opening on this side, and perhaps investigation may show that it is there, though hidden. It certainly looks as though there was a crevice yonder, left when the spot was walled up. I will try it and see."

"If there is, are you sure that it will lead to any better position than this?" asked Cleo, who had been studying out the situation.

"I think it would be possible to make some sort of steps in the side of the shaft here, so that one of us could reach the top. It is not far till one reaches the spot where daylight comes from. We ought to be able to endure it here for a day or so, and in that time a good deal can be done."

"Kayree you be," exclaimed a somewhat familiar voice, muffled somewhat in tone, but sounding wonderfully like the property of Bedrock.

"Ef we can't make ther rifle, may I never borry another quarter. I bin a-listenin' to that conversashun, too much eenterested ter speak, er I'd 'a' chipped in sooner. It's die dog er eat ther hatchet, so I guess yer won't object ter takin' in old Onkle Bedrock on ther ground floor ef he's willin' ter help yer on ther way ter freedom. I must 'a' fixed things up ter a t-y ty, er yer would 'a' noted w'ich way I went, fust thing. I think I got ther dead medecine on ther old sinner now; an' when we git out I'll make ther fur fly—

allers pervidin' Isaac, whosomedever he be, hezn't done fur him a'ready."

With a crash a rock fell out of the side of the shaft, and the grinning face of the speaker appeared in the aperture thus left. The voice was the voice of one of the Bedrocks, but the face was that of the one who, in her mind, Cleo always classed as Number Two. She had seen both men together, and could detect the difference, artistically as one or the other was made up. This was certainly not the man who had been holding her prisoner. He might be no better, but as yet he had been untested.

He crawled through the narrow opening without the least hesitation, and nodded in a familiar way to the deacon when he had straightened his limbs, and given a glance upward.

"I tole yer mother ez I war on ther trail, an' thet thet other onsanctified old reperbate hed su'thin' ter do with yer totin' off. Ef yer hedn't bin too skeered ter lis'sen thar would bin a heap ov trouble an' time saved; but I guess we'll git on ther road rejoicin' in short order. I hev a knife, an' other instruuments, thet kin help in this hyer diffikilty; an' 'thout wastin' breath in 'splanashun, I guess we'd better be goin'."

There was no use to refuse assistance because the tender was made by a man of dubious looks and doubtful honesty. Without more ado the trio began their work, talking little while they were at it, but saving their best breath for the task in hand. The recess in which the man had been hidden was not large, and if there had ever been any upward passage from it, that passage seemed to be hermetically sealed just now.

The result justified Cleo's judgment, and eventually they made their way to the top of the shaft, Jones having scrambled up first, and the other two following, being aided by the rope which the deacon let down to them.

"And now, the next thing to do is to get into town as soon as possible. There is no use to look around to see what has become of the various villains that were or are about here. When they are to be talked to it had better be done with an army at your back."

"Very true, Obediah, very true! There is nothing like prudence to get a man along through the world without more than his share of the rubs of life. But what is true is not always the best for everybody, and I am not sure that it would suit me. Supposing that you and that other gentleman elevate your hands and step forward to where we can have a better view of you. We will relieve you of the further care of the young lady, for whom, I can assure you, we have been diligently searching. Come, now, no nonsense! We are greatly in earnest, and if you have any love for life you will obey orders without asking to hear them over again. I seldom speak twice. When Gloom comes it is always for business."

Sure enough they had dropped from the frying-pan right into the fire. Isaac and the tramps were not visible; but here was General Gloom, and his road-agents.

The deacon held up his hands without a word of remonstrance, or a sign that he thought of disobeying; and Cleo stepped a pace forward, her hands also up, while she peered anxiously into the face of the outlaw, which was now without mask or visor.

On his lips was a sardonic smile as he leaned toward her.

"And it is bliss unspeakable to be thus once more united to a loving wife, and to be on the eve of finding treasures untold."

What she had before suspected was only too true. General Gloom, and the man who, under the name of Leo Dunning, had once at the altar vowed to love and cherish her, were one and the same.

But Bedrock did not intend to be taken. There was little time to consider in; but he was not for an instant at a loss. It went without saying that Miss DeLangdon was the important part of the outfit, and that the intention was, at all hazards, to capture her alive. The way the ground lay it was possible to use her as a shield; and the fellow made the most of it. He darted away like a flash. A couple of shots were fired so as rather to avoid Cleo than hit him. Before the rush that was made could reach him he had vanished from sight; and though the outlaws made a persistent search he got away from them unharmed.

CHAPTER XXX.

LESTER'S LUCK.

WELL, I swear, luck seems to be against me at last!" exclaimed Lester Lawrence when he recovered his consciousness, and felt every bone aching, and a feeling of general sickness all over.

"Where have I been, and what are they doing to me now? Perhaps I am wrong, but it seems to me that I have changed owners, and that this is another jail."

He tried to raise his head, but fell back again, weaker than an infant, and ready to believe that he was going to die. It took him some little time to remember what he had thought just before his senses had been sealed, but the remembrance of the opening door at last came faintly back, and the thought that some mephitic gas was being poured into his cell.

"That accounts for it! Not as bad as I thought. Probably I got an overdose of it; but my lungs seem all right, and as long as they keep sound guess the rest won't hurt. I will be all right in time, though this is awfully provoking. What has become of Cleo? If she has fallen into such hands as these she will have a hard time of it. They seem to be getting all they can, and holding all that they get. I wonder where I am now; and who I am to thank for all this delicate attention."

He might well ask the question, for though he could understand that there was a difference in the atmosphere, and that he had a softer couch than the bare floor on which he had lain when first captured, the darkness was just as complete, and the loneliness as great. He could feel the gnawings of hunger a little more distinctly, now that he had made up his mind that he was in no immediate danger of death; and he wished that his jailer would make his appearance, for the minor attention to his comforts convinced him that he was not to be left there to starve to death.

Whether the wish was father to the fact, or whether it was only a coincidence, the jailer was on the way. He caught a glimpse of a faint ray of light, piercing through the gloom, and as it came within his range of vision, he looked eagerly in its direction.

It seemed to him that he could note the outlines of a man who carried a lantern, and that he was still miles and miles away. He watched him coming nearer and nearer, and at first was sure he was the victim of an optical illusion. There never was a cellar of that extent, and the man had very much the appearance of a gnome.

"Makes a respectable looking sort of a hobgoblin, and that's a fact. About as broad as he is long, and seems to have no face to speak of. Bless my soul, if I don't believe that it is Isaac! In the name of all that is wonderful, how did I get into his hands?"

Isaac it was. The dwarf came waddling along, holding the lantern in front of him, and by a chance he tilted it so that his features, so far as they were ever visible, were plainly to be seen.

The question was natural enough, since he was certain that the dwarf had no connection with his original captor; and he had no knowledge of the transfer.

"His eyes are open, and he looks to be alive," said Isaac, holding up the lantern, so that he could get a clear view of Lawrence's face.

"They would have taken him to where they could torture him until he revealed the secrets that no one but he and Isaac can know, so Isaac saved him; but he would not have cared if he had died. He would not take the warning that would have saved him. What can be done with him now? Shall Isaac knock him in the head? or, shall he be left here, where no mortal man can find him as long as the secrets of the mines remain unknown? Let us hear what he has to say. Isaac is very kind-hearted, and there is no telling how much of a fool soft words may make of him. He may persuade one to set him free. Ha, ha! Ho, ho!"

The laugh with which he ended his soliloquy showed that the dwarf was scarcely in earnest when he spoke of his own tender-heartedness; and Lester understood it after that fashion, though he did not lose all hope of being able to win Isaac in spite of himself. Without waiting for questions he began:

"You needn't say a word, old man, till you bring me some grub. I can't talk a bit

till the machinery is oiled; and if I know anything about you, you will have some bread and meat here before I can get my hands washed and hair combed. Hustle around, Isaac, for I have a heap to tell you, and the sooner you get something to stay my inwards the sooner I can begin."

For a moribund the tones were tolerably distinct, and Isaac allowed himself to be pretty well surprised at hearing them. He had no idea that the recovery, which he seemed to have anticipated, could take place so quickly.

"What can you have to tell to Isaac that he would care to hear? If he listens it will be to please a man that may be about to die. If there is anything on your soul confess, before you are left alone to—die. No one but Isaac knows the road hither; and he will not come soon again. He must watch; he must watch. And perhaps he must kill. Who knows?"

"Oh, rats, Isaac! That is precisely the way another gentleman talked when I fell into his hands at a time that was, I guess, last evening. He was going to allow me to starve, and all that rot; but he came again. He could not help himself any more than you will be able to if I once fix my mind on you. Can't you feel me mesmerizing you now? I tell you, you had a heap sight better make me your friend than your foe; and you can do it right now, by helping me in this mess. You have me trussed up here like a dressed chicken, and I assure you it is confoundedly uncomfortable. Suppose you untie a few of these knots as a starter, while I give you the points that I know you ought to have."

He had caught the eyes of Isaac with his own, and looked into them with a steady stare. He thought he knew the only way to deal with this insane man, and he was sternly striving to capture his will with his own.

For a moment it looked as though he was going to succeed. The dwarf advanced with a hesitating step, and an uncertain look on his face.

Then suddenly, he dashed the lantern upon the rocky floor, and with a cry of terror turned and fled, leaving Lester alone once more.

"Thanks, old man! You have taken yourself off, and no doubt left the way clear. I begin to understand something about the affair, and as my hands are not quite as tightly tied as I was trying to make you believe, it looks as though there would be a fighting chance, after all. If I can get free altogether, and light that lantern, I think I can work my way out of this, and perhaps make a discovery, after all."

If he had not succeeded in making Isaac his servant he had frightened him away; and as his coming had at least shown Lester where he was, the young man spoke in a hopeful tone, and applied himself to work in a way that, a little while before, he would not have believed he could ever feel.

Nor were his hopes doomed to disappointment. After a series of vigorous efforts he felt the cord that had been at his wrists slip clear. After that it was only a question of time. Eventually he stood free, and began to grope around for the lantern, which he hoped had not been seriously damaged by its fall.

He found it, and with a match, that he had in previous searches overlooked, ignited the wick. After that it was no great trouble to discover the tunnel through which Isaac had fled; and this he followed, with a tread that grew stronger with his hopes.

"Good enough! It is as I thought. I have been here before, and know where this leads to," was his mental comment, before he had advanced very far; and he then went on with greater confidence than ever, in spite of the fact that at any moment he might meet the dwarf returning, or lying hidden in some nook, waiting an opportunity to deal him a death-blow. For that he was willing to trust to his luck, which he began to believe had returned to him.

One mine is pretty much like another mine, and of course it was guess-work with him, but Lawrence found that he had made no mistake, and came at last to a little chamber which the dwarf had evidently used as his habitation. His bed was there; and there were some cooking utensils and a cracker-

box, which, on investigation, was found to contain a small supply of provisions, and a loaded revolver.

Lawrence was not quite as hungry as the deacon had been; but the edibles were very acceptable. He laughed to himself as he sat down on the lid of the box, and devoured them. He finished up by taking a long draught from a jug of water that was fortunately within sight, and appropriating the revolver.

"Now I am ready for the upper air!" he exclaimed. "There has been time lost, but if it has done no harm to Cleo I don't know that I regret it, for I have learned a thing or two. Isaac is crazier than ever, and unless his honesty is too strong for him he will make trouble. I think Swallow Tail treated him all right if he made a lease of what he could not buy. Most men would have shot him and been done with it. But he made a mistake, and trusted to his honesty too far, when he let the idiot know what he had found. Probably he forgot the fact that the lease was made for five years, when he got up this mystification for the benefit of his wife. Or, perhaps, he did not suppose that Isaac would ever give a second thought to the mine after he was once out of it. But the dwarf seems very much alive to the fact that there is a *cache*; and that he is going to have it as soon as the lease runs out. By the time that a few more claimants get here we will have a mix of the most beautiful kind, and no mistake."

He looked around him by the light of his lantern, and found the way to the upper air. The shaft was different from the one into which Cleo had ventured, since it was an inclined plane, up which one could clamber without much difficulty.

"Hillo, hillo! What has Isaac been doing? He has been making alterations here, sure enough, and I'd like to know the reason he thought he had in his fool brain. I wouldn't wonder if there would be a renaissance going on here before long, if Mrs. DeLangdon appoints me her chief of staff. The fool might be too honest to steal the treasure, but sharp enough to hide it, so that no one else would be likely to find it. He must have been working here the best part of a year, and I am not sure that he could make all that dump heap in that time. But it helps me out of the hole quite comfortably. If he had left the shaft as it was, I might have had a lively wait here till he came back again, in case he had drawn the rope up when he ran away. Wonder if I will meet him on the road?"

The thought that he might made Lester proceed with caution. There was no trouble whatever in reaching the upper world, though he found that the mouth of the incline was as carefully hidden as the location would admit of. Before creeping out he listened and looked.

He neither saw nor heard anything of Isaac, but he heard the report of several pistols at no great distance, and the sounds of voices. If the dwarf was not about, some one else was near. The sounds directed his sight. Before him was a tableau. Cleo was cowering back; the deacon was resting at his ease; Gloom was triumphant; and several men were conveniently located within supporting distance of their chief. There were others of the outlaws tearing around in search of Bedrock, and while Lawrence waited to get a better understanding of the situation they began to return.

Meantime, as Cleo shrunk back Gloom advanced. He held out his hand.

"It is scarcely worth while to attempt to feign ignorance, or to struggle with fate. When I agreed to help your mother over her difficulties I purchased you body and soul. I kept my word, and did my part, at some risk, if not ruin, to myself. It is time that you were thinking of fulfilling your side of the contract. For fear you may object I shall take measures to render objection useless. I would have preferred unearthing that treasure which has brought you hither before revealing myself; but since the fates appear to so decide, I will take the chance of combining business with pleasure, and attending to the two together. I assure you that it will be best to submit gracefully to the inevitable. As the people of the Flat have not thus far succeeded in unearthing you, it is safe to say that they never will."

Before they find the trail they have not yet begun to look for we shall be miles away."

"And probably going in different directions," said Lawrence, stepping out into the open, and holding the drop as usual.

"There seems to be some mistake in your calculations, and if you insist on verifying them I shall have to take you out of the damp."

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

THERE were plenty of men who would have been willing to help Mrs. DeLangdon—either out of the goodness of their hearts, or for the sake of the speculation that might be in it—but the difficulty was to find a starting-point.

Of course she had given up any present thought of the mine, or the *cache* that was to be found in it, and was concerned solely about her daughter. Under such circumstances she had nothing to say in regard to the why and wherefore of her coming to Ginger Flat; and there were no questions asked of her.

But which way had Cleo gone; and who had helped her going? Naturally enough, suspicion pointed toward General Gloom; but at the same time it was understood that the young lady was missing before that chief of the road had put in an appearance with his band of rough-riders. It was a task that no one cared to undertake—to trail him down, simply on suspicion. Indeed, the majority of the men who spoke in regard to it, said freely enough that it could not be done. The thing had been tried; and always ended in failure, if nothing worse. He was like a mountain flea; here this minute, and somewhere else a great ways off, the next. If the abduction was planned for the sake of wringing money out of the mother of the victim there would be news before long, and in public opinion, about the only thing to do was to wait for that news. When it came it would at least give an idea of which way the young lady had gone; and it would be time enough then to lay out a campaign, if a fight was to be had.

That was the way that the men of Ginger Flat talked to themselves when the subject was discussed at the Rising Sun, the Gilded Claw, and other popular places of resort. As long as there was no definite point at which to aim they thought it was worse than folly, "to go on a general fishing excursion, with the strong prospect of never getting even a nibble," as Mike Willard expressed it.

But the letter which Mrs. DeLangdon received changed all that, and worked results which its writer had not contemplated.

In the first place, Timothy Jerkes was waiting anxiously to know what it was about, since he suspected that it referred to the missing young lady.

The madame was inclined to keep it to herself, until she had thoroughly considered its meaning. It might be a blind, or it might be the first in a series. When Timothy, after a hint or two, inquired flat-footed about it she showed it to him, with some misgivings as to its being worthy of attention.

But Jerkes was delighted.

"Why, this hyer gives ther hull thing away. Ef he's tellin' ther truth we kin git right down onter 'em. Mebbe no one see'd ther fu'st tramp a-sneakin' out ov town; but you kin bet yer lively dollars thet some 'un kin tell which way ther second went, ez war a-follerin'. An' this hyer man ez brung this—he's over at ther Hole in ther Wall, now. He kin be found, an' give all ther starter we want. Jest leave this matter in my hands. Ye'r a woman, an' a stranger, so you can't be expected ter know how ter go about it; but I'll hev an army on ther trail afore an hour, an' I shouldn't wonder ef ther young lady war back hyer afore night."

The door was open, and Timothy spoke enthusiastically. Leo Dunning was passing at the moment, and heard the words. As he had a full knowledge of the previous position of affairs, he wanted to know what was the new development, and stepped into the room.

"Pardon the intrusion," he began—and was stopped by a cry from Mrs. DeLangdon.

"Leo Dunning! If you are here, it is

scarcely worth while to search further. I can guess who is behind this outrage."

"Again, pardon me, madam. You evidently mistake me for a man who certainly bore a close resemblance; and I should judge that you have reason to think the worst of him. When the full story comes out, and justice has been done to him and to me, I think that you will admit that I have suffered at his hands as greatly as yourself. I was talking to Mr. Lester of him last night, when we were interrupted by the fracas on the street. Let that go for the present, however. When there is more time I shall be happy to explain to you in full. At present I think I understand that you have had some intelligence of your daughter, which Jerkes thinks will be of service. Allow me to put myself also at your disposal. I cannot help thinking that my double has had a hand in the matter, and so I have a personal interest in it that gives me the privilege of insisting."

Mrs. DeLangdon had watched him narrowly while he was speaking, and detected some differences which enabled her to believe this was not the Leo Dunning she had known in the East. Without a word she handed him the letter.

"Mr. Jerkes is right," he said, after he had looked it over.

"This is important. If the fellow can be followed, it is more than likely he will lead us directly to the spot where your daughter is to be found. But it will never do to go without sufficient force to be prepared for any emergency. Rest yourself in peace. Your daughter is as good as found."

"But, remember that I go with the party," said Mrs. DeLangdon, firmly.

"Yes, yes," answered Dunning, in too great a hurry to offer any objection. "If a horse that you can ride can be found in the town, you shall be with us. Mr. Jerkes must get together the party, since I am a stranger to the town and its people, but I will furnish the sinews of war, and go along. Something tells me that I am on the high road to meet my man at last."

Jerkes knew who to look for, and where to find the men for the occasion. He hurried around, picking up one here and another there, and his only embarrassment was from the superabundance of volunteers. In an incredibly short time he had the outfit complete, as he supposed, and ranged up in front of the Rising Sun, waiting for Mrs. DeLangdon to join in. Every man was equipped for war, and could be relied on.

Just as the start was being made a volunteer joined, in the person of Mike Willard, who heard what was going on, and did not hesitate about taking his place in the ranks, along with the rest.

Timothy had been a true prophet. There was little difficulty about taking up the trail of the second Bedrock, though it was not at all times so easy to follow it. If it had not been for one old scout and prospector who knew well the ground toward which it led they might have lost it altogether.

"It's a hit or miss sort of trail, I take it," said he; "and I reckon that the best thing we can do is not to waste too much time trying to follow it too close. I'll bet rocks that I know just where it is leading to, and if I had the say-so I would make a straight cut for the spot. Mining is played out in that region, nowadays, but there are some old shafts there, and as good hiding-ground as any one would want to find. If we try it over there we will be pretty sure to strike the track, and won't be so far behind, either."

The idea seemed to be a good one, and was acted on without delay. Without trying to follow in the footsteps of Bedrock, they made a cast to head him off, and as a result the progress was much more rapid than before.

When they reached the region to which the old prospector had alluded they proceeded with more caution. The party spread over the ground, looking for any sign of footprints, and advanced steadily. Finally, to the delight of every one, they saw the object of their search running toward them, just when they were listening to the sounds of pistol-shots some little distance away.

He evidently did not want to avoid them, for he turned so as to bring his course more in their direction; and finally came up to Mrs. DeLangdon without any signs of doubt or fear.

"Just in time!" he shouted.

"There are lively times ahead. Gloom is there, and has your daughter in his hands. He did not take her, though; but the tramp I spoke of in my letter. Perhaps they will follow me, but I hardly think they can find which way I came. Hurry, or they may be gone before you get there. I can lead the way."

"And she is safe, as yet?" asked Mrs. DeLangdon, with a quiver in her voice.

"Safe and sound. I had rescued her from the party that had carried her off, but just as we were starting for the town, Gloom appeared on the scene and captured her. He would have taken me, but I showed a light pair of heels. That is all there is time for. Come on, if you do not want to be too late!"

The men were crowding around, anxious to hear what he had to say. Had it not been for the pistol-shots they might have felt more like lynching than believing; but those sounds were almost of themselves a convincing proof that he was telling the truth. Without question or delay they dropped in behind the man and moved to the rescue, just as two of the men who had been acting as flankers came toward the main body, bringing between them the other and original Bedrock.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A GRIM JOKE.

LUCKY LAWRENCE held the drop, but he was, none the less, doing a rash thing. He did not have all of the outlaws in front of him, and there was no telling how soon one of them would try a snap-shot at him, and perhaps bring him down. Nine men out of ten, if they were going to interfere at all, would have shot first, and spoken afterward.

But, Lawrence was willing to gamble on his luck, while he never had fired a shot at a man without a previous warning. He kept his eyes remarkably well open, and at the first sign of attack intended to shoot. And perhaps he saw something else, that Gloom had not noticed.

Once before, Lester had held the same advantage, and that time the outlaw had quailed. This time he took the other tack without hesitation. He was willing to risk a shot at his person when there was nothing better to be done.

"Down with him, boys!" he shouted. "We have no further need of him."

And to help in the good work he tore out his own revolver.

But, it came a shade late. As Lawrence pitched forward, shooting as he fell, there was a cheer, a discharge of firearms, and a dozen of the men from Ginger Flat rushed forward, with the real Leo Dunning at their head.

The bullet from the pistol of Lucky Lester had crashed through the hand of the outlaw chief, but had the force at the beck of the latter been stronger he would have made a good fight yet. He shouted a yell of defiance, changed his revolver to the other hand, and sent one shot at the man whom he so strongly resembled. By that time the few outlaws were either past resistance, or had thrown down their arms, and when Bedrock Number Two leaped upon Gloom's back, and bore him to the ground, the battle had reached its sudden termination.

The fall of Lawrence had been premeditated. When the shots of the agents had passed over him he sprang to his feet, and was at the side of Cleo by the time that Dunning was fairly on the scene. The young lady was no doubt rejoiced to see him, but she had no time for thanks. Hardly had the last shot been fired when there was an addition to the party from the Flat. Mrs. DeLangdon had discreetly halted in the rear until the battle was over, but now came forward to greet her daughter.

Following her came two men, who brought a prisoner between them.

The prisoner was the original Bedrock; and he marched along jauntily enough, though there was a revolver at no great distance from either ear.

There was a brief space for congratulations, and the binding of prisoners; then Dunning spoke to the young lady.

"Excuse the interruption, but the boys are anxious to get the certain truth. We stumbled across one of the tramps who went

by the name of Bedrock, and he turned out to be a detective who came down here to capture this General Gloom. We captured the other, who insisted that he had been taking a look for the hiding-place of the outlaws. We had doubts of him, and the detective tells us a remarkable story about the old fellow, saying that it was certain beyond doubt that he had abducted you from the Flat, and had been holding you prisoner somewhere in this neighborhood. Is this correct?"

"It is the truth, though I must say that he did his spiriting as gently as was possible, and that he offered no indignities, but professed to be working in my interest," answered Cleopatra, who did not feel at all revengeful. "He had two confederates; and I am afraid that they were punished badly enough. The last I saw of them they were fighting for their lives."

"Thanks! That is all the boys wanted to know. Your words corroborate the story, and it must be true. They will take care of him."

"Let them deal gently with the old sinner. He is an oddity, and something of a genius. But, tell me, pray! how did you come to get here, just in the nick of time? No doubt Mr. Lawrence would have risen to the occasion, but the odds were certainly terribly against him."

"Through Bedrock, the detective. He sent a letter to your mother, saying that he was on the trail of her daughter, and when she showed it to Jerkes he told the news, and got up a party of us to look after him. We couldn't find out which way the first tramp went, but had little trouble in striking the track of the second; and the rest you probably understand, at least as well as I could explain it."

"And yet you captured them both?"

"Oh, it was only chance that some of the boys on the flanks struck the man who carried you away. They were bringing him up when the detective made his appearance, and I had no opportunity for examination. They have just given me a hint of his story, and wanted me to ask you how it was."

Dunning stood over Cleo in quite a fatherly manner, and she hardly suspected that he wanted to screen from her eyes what was going on.

When she had corroborated the story of the second Bedrock, a glance of intelligence went around the circle of listeners, and they silently withdrew.

"Guess that's enough," growled Mike Willard, in an undertone. "All we need is a rope. There's trees in plenty."

"And there's your rope," said another of the party, pointing at the cord by which Cleo had passed up and down the shaft.

"Good enough! The court and jury had better retire; and Bedrock, he had better go along with them," suggested Willard.

Without another word the knot of men surrounded Bedrock, and then slowly drifted away, around the clump of bushes through which Cleo had dashed in her flight.

It was only by chance that Willard had attached himself to the expedition, but he had been doing very good service. He had asked one of the boys where the party was bound for, and had received a hint that it would probably have the pleasure of suspending Uncle Bedrock before it returned. As his feelings for the tramp were not of the kindest nature, the prospect was too brilliant to forego. He went back to get his heavy armament, and then joined in the procession. Now he came to the front in spite of himself. He would have preferred some one else at the head of affairs; but sooner than see the ends of justice defeated, he was willing to act as master of ceremonies, so long as he knew that the rest were with him heart and soul.

"I don't believe it is worth while to ask you if you have anything to say for yourself. You always have a heap to say, but it never seems to fit the occasion. Perhaps we had better do the talking. We want you to understand distinctly that this is a neck-tie party, that intends to finish up its business as it goes along. If it had been a man that you treated after such a fashion we might have laid on the stick for a while, and then turned your face in some direction that was not toward the Flat, and told you to move on. But, when it comes to running off a young lady, the town draws the line a little

stronger; and it draws it right around your neck. If you want a few minutes to yourself, before we swing you off, the court has no objections; but if you try to beg off it will shut you up, too quick."

This rather original sort of speech to a prisoner, who had not yet noted any preparations for a trial and yet could witness the arrangements for his execution, did not seem to discourage the tramp.

"Perhaps, then, you wouldn't keer ter hear my 'count ov ther affair? Thar's allers two sides ter a story; an' both on 'em are jin'rally wu'th list'nin' to."

"We haven't a particle of use for what we know will be a lie. If you know anything about praying you had better say a word or two; then we will turn you off."

The response was brutal, but did not administer any visible shock, though it was accentuated by the dangling noose, and the sight of the hands that were waiting to place it around his neck.

"The cend might 'a' come in a wuss shape, so I kin peromise yer that I won't kick. Fact are, it's a weary sort er world, an' ef thar are no show fur happiness hyer, prehabs it will be better somewhar else. I hev enjoyed me leetle game, ther rights ov w'ich you don't seem ter have prezactly onderstood; it war a passin' gleam—a leetle rift ov fun through ther darkness ov a benighted world; an' ef ther time are arrove ter pay ther damidges, jest go on with yer sheep-stealin'. It's a hard luck, but a happy endin'. I'd 'a' liked ter hev found thet boy ov mine; but, thet'll keep. Ther troubles ov a tramp'll be over, an' yer Uncle Bedrock'll be off ther road furever."

As he ceased speaking, the noose tightened, willing hands hauled on the rope, his body rose in the air, and the elevation was complete.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

REVELATIONS.

WHEN the lynch court adjourned to a more suitable location for the continuance of its proceedings, there was still quite a little knot gathered around the prisoners, and around Mrs. DeLangdon and her daughter. As the ladies had some confidences of their own to make, attention was, for a time, thoughtfully turned in another direction, and they were left to their own devices, so far as conversation went.

"I have my man at last," said the real Leo Dunning, addressing Lester Lawrence.

"If my offer of a reward is to hold good, I am not sure how it is to be divided. Your shot at the villain's hand was what really made the capture possible, I do believe."

"Don't worry yourself over the question, I claim none of it. I was working for my own interest; and if I had been a trifle later I would have passed over the range with all my harness on. If there is any cash going I guess it will belong to that detective. He is rather a tough looking individual to lay claim to the title, but I suppose he is different sort of a looking man when he gets out of his disguise. If I had not seen the original first I would have sworn that he was the man he professed to be. I don't know which to admire the most: his skill in the make-up, or his cheek in sticking to the name after he ran foul of the actual owner. I don't think that he counted on meeting him here or he would never have run the risk."

"No, indeed," said the detective, who had overheard what was said, though he was standing at quite a distance from the two.

"I once stumbled across the old fellow by a chance, and as he struck me as a great original I made some studies. When I came down here I was confident that he was not in this region, and donned the disguise. I tramped along the roadside, toward the Flat, and as I knew the cheek of the man, thought that it would be a good way to make my first appearance by hailing the stage. When I came face to face with my original I determined to brazen it out. Perhaps I made a mistake; but as the end seems to have been well reached, there is no use to have regrets over a slip in details."

"There is certainly a remarkable resemblance," declared Lester, while Dunning eyed the man closer than ever. "The clothes would be all right, anyhow; but, there is a turn of the lip, and a cast of the eye, that it is hard to account for. If Primrose could

see it he might think—if he had been in earnest—"

"Primrose! That is my name. You surprised me once before by mentioning it."

"That may be; but his name is Rufus Primrose, too; and he is looking for a long-lost son, who ought to be about your age. It might be rough on you, but stranger things than this have happened."

"Heavens!" exclaimed the detective, somewhat wildly, and staring about him. "If it should be so! It *must* be so! Where is he? I must speak with him at once!"

"You had better make haste," answered Lester, somewhat ironically, though on the principle that strong medicine was what was needed just then.

"The boys have taken him around the corner, and I guess they are hanging him by this time."

"Do you think that this is all true?" asked Dunning, hurriedly.

"I should judge it was; and I think I have taken the best plan to save the life of the old humbug. If the detective interests himself he may get judgment suspended, and after that there will not be much danger of his being hung. I am not so sure that he does not deserve it; but as Cleo has come through all right we might afford to let him slip through with a scare."

"Scare! I doubt if they have made him wink. Come! I am interested in this, myself. I must see the ending."

"All right, though if Primrose can't make the rifle there will be no use for us to try to interfere. The boys were too quiet not to be in earnest, and they would fight at the drop of a hat. We would have to clean up the whole crowd for keeps before we could get him out of their clutches."

Lawrence still felt bitterly the danger and discomfort which the tramp had caused Cleo, and though his voice would not have been for hanging, he did not feel strongly called to interfere. Had it not been for Dunning and the detective he might have closed his eyes till the business in hand was over.

Obedient to Dunning's request he turned, and the two followed in the wake of the detective, who was already out of sight.

It was just as well that they did not start sooner, and it was better that they arrived when they did. The imitation might have fared almost as roughly as the original. Dunning was already in trouble, though he had successfully moved for a stay of execution.

The little path had showed him which way to go, and when he came dashing on the scene he did not hesitate, but flung himself at the knot of men who were at the lower end of the rope. They were just about fastening it when the cyclone struck them, and doubled them over about as effectively as though the storm had come from the clouds. They went over in a heap, and Bedrock came down with a run.

"Stop, gentlemen! For Heaven's sake, listen! I have just found out that this man may be, and probably is, my father! Let me have a word with him. He cannot, he shall not, die this way!"

He waved his bare hands in front of the men from Ginger Flat, as they scrambled up from the ground, and, fortunately, his words came plainly to their ears, and the absence of weapons gave them no excuse for shooting.

"Have your word out, if you want it!" cried Mike Willard, pistol in hand, as he leaped to the side of Bedrock. "You can have all the talk you want with him; but after that, it don't make a bit of difference if he is your father-in-law—he must swing all the same."

Bedrock had not risen from the ground, and the men of the Flat gathered around with their weapons in their hands, as the detective bent over him.

"In mercy's name, speak the truth!" he whispered in the ear of the prostrate man, who looked up at him without excitement or surprise.

"My name is Rufus Primrose. Years ago I was left with a family in San Francisco. A sum was deposited for my support by my father, who said that he was going to change his name, and marry an Eastern lady, and that hereafter I need look for no recognition from him. Are you that father; am I that son?"

"Guess you hev ther p'int's down fine. Ef kayrect you hev yer revenge. Better stand

aside, and let the boys go on with their frolic."

"I want no revenge; and I will save your life. There may be much to explain, and something to forgive; but I will stand by you to the last."

"That's a fair platform, an' ef I bed found you when I war lookin' fur you, I'd 'a' said it war good ez wheat. But it's rayther late ter wring it in on ther boys, now. Mike are bound ter git even; ther rest think ther occasion justifies; an' life are a failure, aryhow. Better save yer breath an' let me flicker."

"That's the square way to put it," broke in Mike, who wanted no more delay. "Give him a gentle h'iste, and start him on his way once more, rejoicing."

Bedrock staggered to his feet, and gazed around benignantly on the crowd. The rope was still around his neck, and his time for earth appeared to be short. He would have gone the way of all flesh, and a little sooner than his allotted time, had there not been another interruption. Leo Dunning stepped forward.

"Hold on there, boys! There is something more in this than you have yet got on to. He may have fooled the rest of you, but he can't fool me! This man is old Swallow Tail himself. I seem to be the last man he spoke to in that character; and I know."

"Swallow Tail er not, what's the dif?" asked one of the lynchers, roughly. "It is what he did, and not what or who he is, that we're tryin' ter git justice fur."

"But don't you see? If I am not mistaken—as I swear I am not—he is the father of the young lady. Without better evidence of what were his intentions you can hardly hang a man for taking possession of his own daughter."

All stood in utter amazement at this astounding revelation.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE UPSHOT OF THE AFFAIR.

"Look here," said Lawrence, when he had fairly digested the revelation. "As this seems to be something of a family matter, suppose you explain a little. If this is the truth—and I have some confidence in the statements of Mr. Dunning—why under the sun didn't you say something? What did you let the boys hang you for?"

The chuckle of Bedrock was as oily as ever as he responded:

"When a gent goes in fur a joke he are bound ter laugh ef ther shoe does pinch; an' yer never heard ov ole Bedrock squealin' when ther game went ther wrong way. An' then, me boy, marridge war a failure; ther life ov a tramp gittin' ter be s'uthin' ov a delusion; an', take it all 'round, methought it war about time ter retire. I kin live, but I ain't sure thet I want ter."

"Well, I am sure of one thing, and that is: you are as crazy a man as ever went to Bedlam. It is to be hoped that you have got enough amusement out of this thing to pay everybody else for the worry and danger to which they have been put. Isaac is a sound man, and a sane one, alongside of you, and until these matters about the mine and your cache are straightened up, I think I will appoint myself a committee to see that you don't make any more trouble. This thing will have to be broken to your wife and daughter, but, I swear, I don't know how to do it."

"Take them both together, and I don't know that I see my way clear, myself," said Bedrock, speaking like a different man. "I was taking my own way to do it, and you men were going to hang me for it. Perhaps, now, I ought to let you point out yours. If you have any great regard for the elder lady, you can break it to her gently, that her husband still lives, and, meanwhile, allow me to hunt up a package of clothing I have in this neighborhood. I can make such changes as are needed to produce a different man, and Bedrock can be buried for the present. The younger lady is a tramp, and I do not care to shock her, either, but, if the old fellow turned over a new leaf, I am not sure that she would refuse to own him. As to this long-lost son of mine—I had not forgotten him. I was hunting him up to let him know that there was a little bank account to his name that he might draw on whenever he needed it. I see that he is a chip of the

old block; and guess he can understand me about as well as I can understand myself. I got tired of making money for other people to spend, and when I thought I had done enough of it I struck and started on a new tack. I have seen some queer phases of life, and forgotten a good deal, in the doing of it, that I did not want to remember. As long as I had provided for wife and children, who had a right to complain? As a walking philosopher I studied nature and mankind, and got my profit out of it. That is all I have to say about it."

"And a good heap, plenty," retorted Lawrence, with more show of indignation than he felt. "Get yourself into those other duds that you have spoken of—we can trust you to the care of your detective son while you are doing it—and I will go back to the ladies. As soon as we get things cleared up a little we want to be looking out for that cache of nuggets—if you ever made any. Isaac, the dwarf, is taking means to appropriate it; and I don't know but what he deserves to succeed. He has filled up your old shaft, and started a new one. He is too honest to steal; but if the treasure was not found by its rightful owners within the time he had marked out as being theirs, it was going to revert to him, if he knew how to bring that desired consummation about."

"Unless he has toted it off altogether I guess he has not hidden it so that I cannot find. Rest easy about that. I will look after his interests. He has been a better guardian of the treasure than a bank cashier, and he shall be rewarded accordingly."

It seems scarcely worth while to describe in detail the way that Lawrence made his revelations, or the manner they were received. As Cleo had been somewhat prepared, the shock was not as great as might have been expected when she was informed that her father was living. Mrs. DeLangdon, having originally married the man from the West for the sake of his money, had not as much sentimental interest about the reunion as she had about the question whether the cache was still hers, and whether he came otherwise well-provided. It had been years since she had seen him, and she was ready to expect some changes, but as she had not recognized him in Bedrock when he originally presented himself at the Rising Sun, so, she did not recognize Bedrock in the well-dressed man, of fair proportions, and rather retiring mien, whom Lester Lawrence presented at the camp-fire a little later on. As she never heard that his proper name was Primrose, and that he had taken that of DeLangdon as more agreeable to the queenly lady he had decided should be his wife, the secret of his former marriage, and his relationship to the detective must have been well kept. He satisfied her that he was not a pauper, nor likely to give her much trouble with lover-like advances, such as he had forsworn long ago. When the party returned to the Flat the complete DeLangdon family went with it, and the prisoners went along.

Of course, the cache was found; Isaac was satisfied by a bounty and some attentions to his comfort; Deacon Jones returned to his store with his honesty renewed, and a determination to forswear the company of doubtful pards; the Gilded Claw and the Rising Sun continued in operation; General Gloom, after a legal defense, made possible by the payment of Lawrence's note, received due punishment for his crimes; Lester Lawrence, having made friends with Mrs. DeLangdon at the time of her extremity, kept his place in her good will, even when she found out that his true name was Manton Dunleigh; and Cleo was finally convinced that he was her destiny. Talkative James and his pard did not perish at the hands of Isaac, but valiantly ran away the moment they could escape from his clutches. They had been pards of Bedrock during some of his tramps, and he had a good deal of confidence in them, so that he spent much money and some time until they were found. Then they were rewarded for their assistance in a suitable manner, and it is to be feared that they will continue to be pensioners on his bounty until the end of time, or until his wealth is exhausted.

And the strangest thing in the history of Ginger Flat is, that from the hour of the raid by General Gloom and his men on the town, nothing has ever been heard of Hark Havens.

What his fate was has since been a mooted point. Some have declared that he was killed on that occasion, while others have even gone so far as to say that he was General Gloom himself, and that a certain Long Bill, who had been seen in the town on several occasions, was identical with the same individual. That is legend; authoritative history on the subject remains to be written.

After Cleo and Manton Dunleigh were publicly reunited, according to the orthodox way, they discussed the question at odd times, but when last heard from were as far from certainty as ever. Probably they do not care.

THE END.

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